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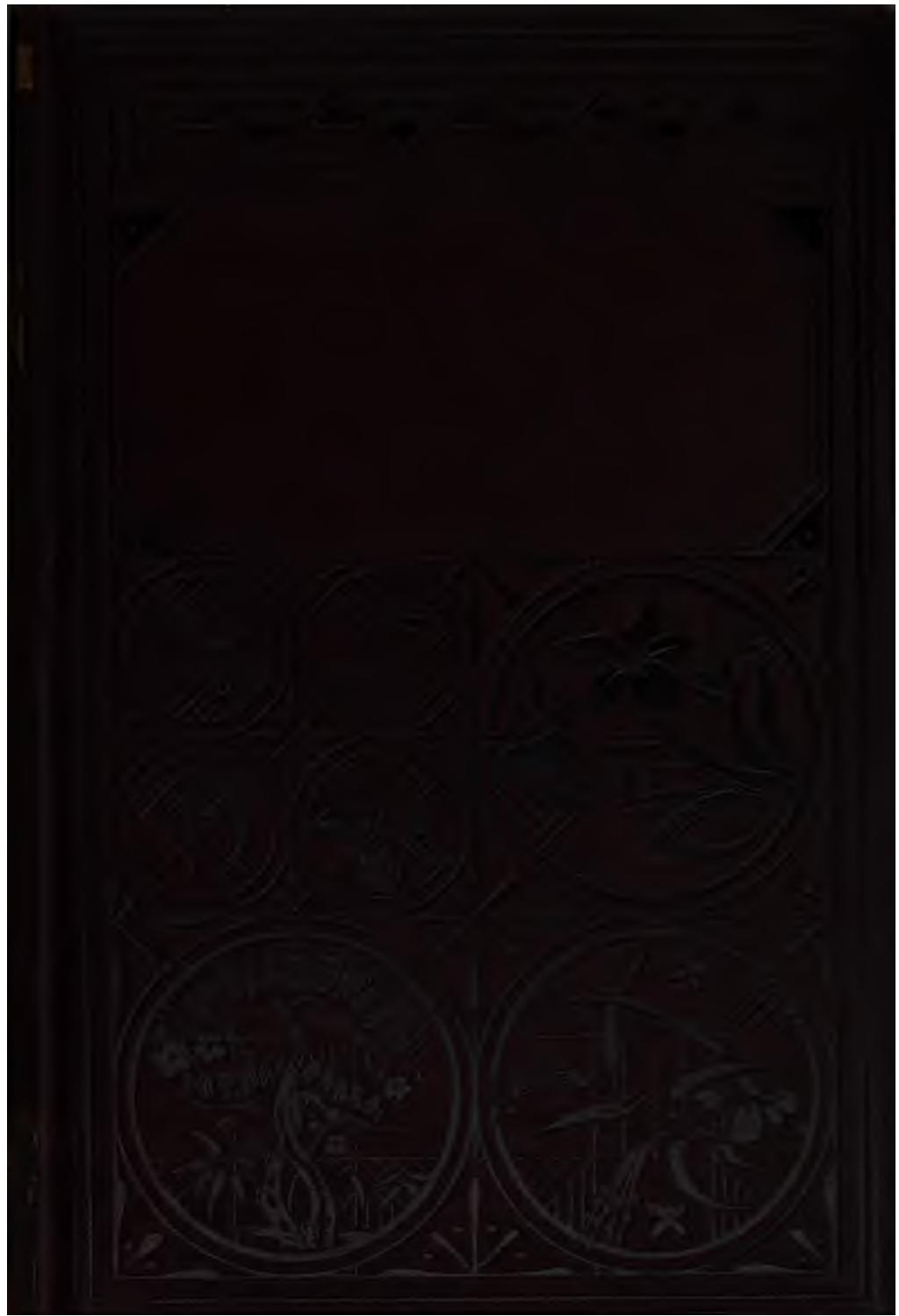
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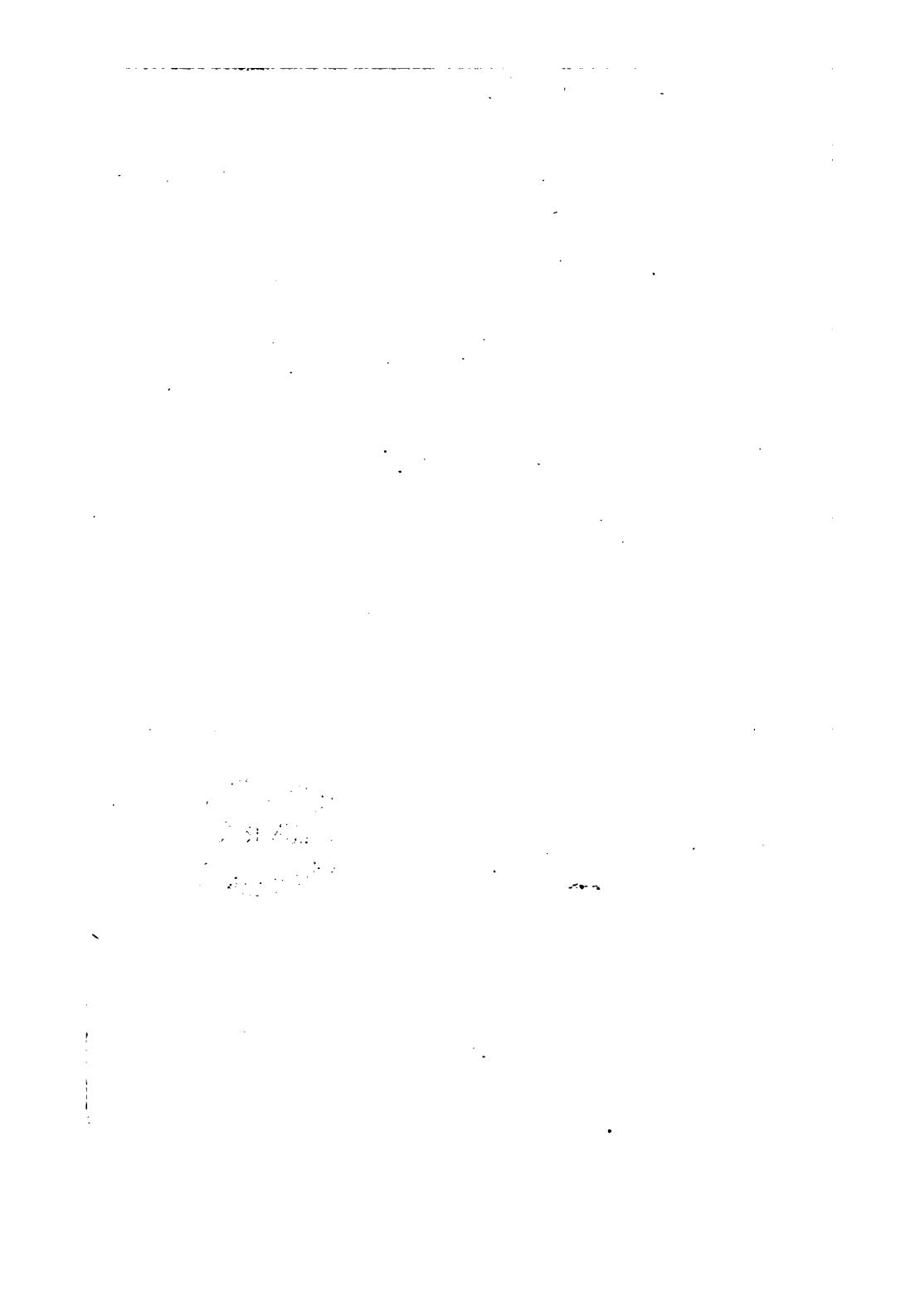




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THE VIKING.

A Novel.

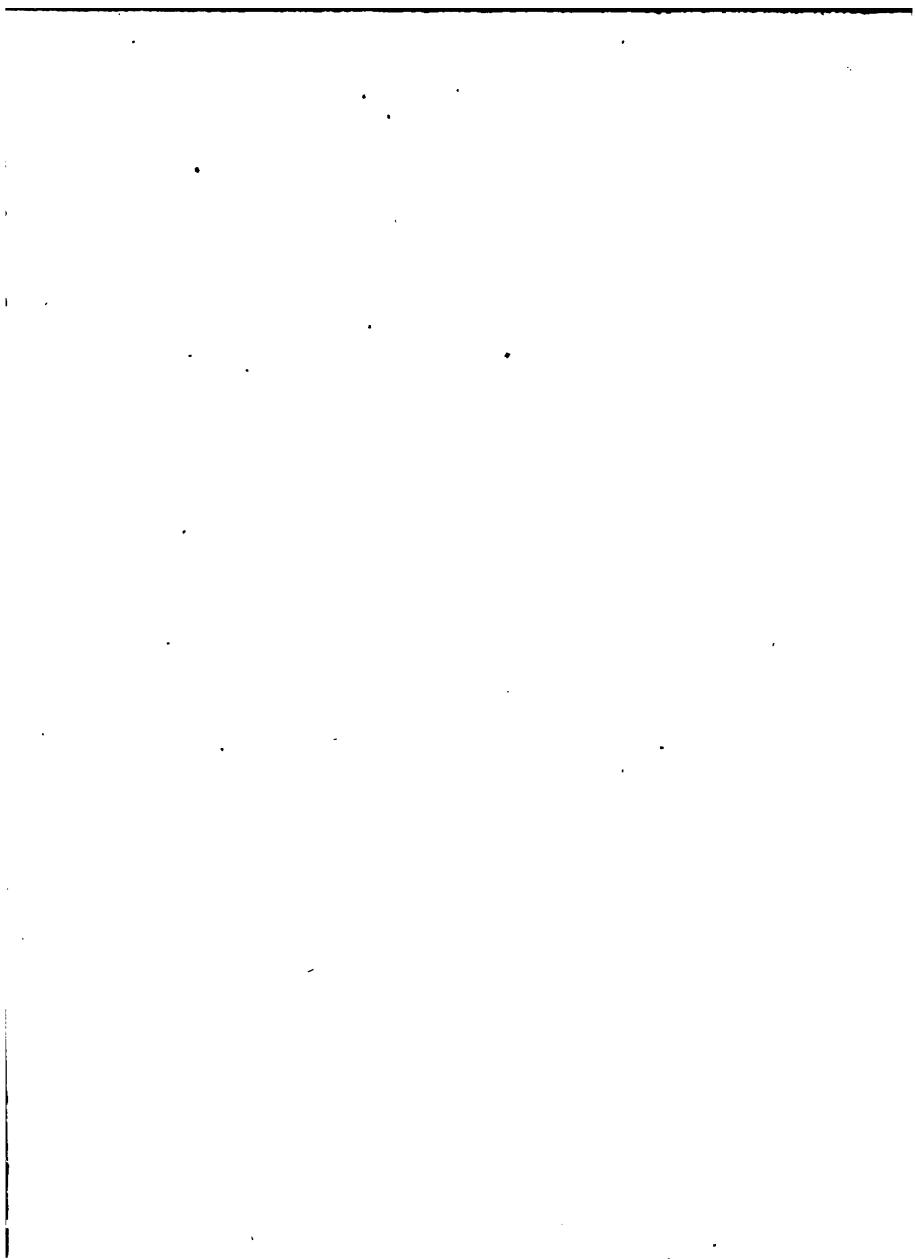
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M. R.



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251. f. 71.



THE VIKING.

CHAPTER I.

1st Speaker. Come, prithee, friend, and hearken to my tale.

2nd do. Willingly. Treats it of romance?

Visit we the groves of sunny Italy?

Or go we where the dark-brow'd maids of Spain

Wander forth as pilgrims to the holy fane

Of St. Iago of Compostello?

1st do. Neither, friend. We turn to the far-distant, foggy north,

With its people so hardy and bold,

With eyes that flash like the bright blue steel,

And their locks of pale gold.'

In the course of eleven centuries, no country has changed more than Norway, or perhaps as much. Its fields and cultivated land, which now, to say the least that justice demands, repay the toil bestowed upon them by the labourer, were then nothing but marshes and morasses, interspersed with impenetrable pine forests, the favourite haunt of the wolf and the bear. Now its shores are visited by foreigners of all nations, attracted there by business or pleasure; then it was regarded with superstitious awe by the more civilised parts of Europe as

the chosen abode of those grisly gods, Odin and Thor; over its morasses and along its shores flew the dismal fate-maidens, with shrieks more piercing than the howls of the wolves. And well did the character of its inhabitants accord with that won for it by its inhospitable shores, who, under the various names of Scandinavians, Goths, Northmen, or Danes, century after century, rolled their tide of devastations over more peaceful Europe. Many came forth never to return; others, as if gorged with their prey, returned at intervals to their mountain fastnesses, to repose and to recruit, and then to come forth again with fresh vigour, and a seemingly inexhaustible band of plunderers, to harry the shores of those unhappy countries whose inhabitants were too weak to defend themselves.

Nevertheless, with all their cruelty, and barbarity, there is a charm about them that attracts us; their wild courage and wilder generosity rivet our attention, and we listen more willingly to the tales and legends of their doings than we do to the tame chronicles of prosperous, industrious citizens; and this is why they seem to us fit heroes for a tale, wild and rude as themselves. It must not, however, be supposed that it is at all intended to give a perfect portrait of either the Viking's character or manners; that were far indeed beyond the writer's power, who will be quite content if the wild Northmen are placed in anything of an amusing or interesting light, from whom, according to tradition, she may claim in some remote degree to be descended.

On a bold projecting rock, at the entrance of a long, narrow, Norwegian gulf, there stood, towards the end of the

eighth century, a large wattled building overlooking the sea, separated from the edge of the cliff by a mere strip, but sufficiently wide to allow a beacon to be kindled upon it in times of necessity without much risk of setting the dwelling on fire. Below, the cliff sunk perpendicularly into the sea, which dashed its fury against the base, and sometimes during the winter storms threw its spray up high enough to wet those who were walking on the terrace. Behind the dwelling was a dark pine forest, which extended many a mile into the interior and down nearly to the sea on the right; there the cliff a few miles farther on gradually subsided, and ended in a morass, which separated the sea from the forest. To the left, on the other side of the estuary, was a mighty cliff, which rose like a giant amid his surroundings, and well served as a landmark for leagues out to sea.

Here, in this rude dwelling, lived Oscar, the 'sea-king,' as he was proudly called by his kinsmen and followers—'sea-robber,' as he was more contemptuously designated by those who perhaps had but too much reason for what they said of him, that he was the fiercest of all the Vikings that at that period harassed the northern and western shores of Europe. Here he lived in savage grandeur, declaring, by the very rudeness of his dwelling, that his home was not on the land, but, like the sea-birds, he only sought there temporary repose.

On the shores of the gulf dwelt his followers, rough, hardy men, who, like their lord, sighed at the inglorious inactivity to which winter had reduced them, and longed for the return of spring, that they might again launch their galleys, which, now drawn up high and dry out

of the way of the winter storms, showed, by the care and strength with which they were built, that their owners put far more value upon them than they did upon the rude hovels where they passed the dark months of the year.

At this season, when you went through the village (if the miserable huts deserved such a name), you might see many a stalwart warrior, but upon the height above, all was still; for, except at stated times of high festival or solemn religious rite, Oscar lived much alone. A few weeks hence, the icy chains of winter will be broken, and then all will be gone, except a few too aged and decrepit to accompany the warriors. These were no serfs following a feudal lord, but free-born, proud, unyielding men; yet, devoted to Oscar, and bound to him by the strongest attachment, they would have followed him through fire and water, and they cheerfully obeyed his least command.

And yet Oscar possessed none of those qualities which constitute a popular leader. He was neither gay, merry, nor courteous, had no power of oratory, was gloomy, taciturn, no lover of the festive board, and sternly condemned all excess thereat; he ruled by the mere force of an iron will, undaunted courage, and perseverance, that was alike undisturbed by prosperity, unbroken by adversity. His followers loved him passionately, went without questioning wherever he led them, as with him there was but one alternative, death or victory—they left their bones mouldering on the field, or they carried away their black ravens in triumph.

It was just the close of winter; the frost and snow

had had it all their own way for many months, but though spring was beginning to gain ground daily, almost hourly, she had to fight hard for every inch she won, and now and then she was, as it were, beaten back by a fiercer onslaught than usual, and had to begin the strife again. It was getting late in the day; the sun, having done his best to melt the snow during some hours, was tending towards the west; the upper country was still bright, but many spots close down by the river were already growing dark; and the Northmen's galleys threw dark shadows along the beach.

Two children, a boy and girl, were playing up and down among the boats. The boy, who looked about twelve years old, was dressed, according to the fashion of the age and country, in a loose upper garment, made of the rudely tanned fur of some wild animal, and confined at the waist by a girdle of wolf-skin, in which was stuck a short dagger; his head had no other covering than its own dark hair, which, together with his well-formed frame, betokened rather agility than strength, and his bright hazel eyes, showed a more southern descent: while his exceedingly fair skin, now flushed with air and exercise, proved that there was, at least, some of the Northman's blood in his veins: probably he was the child of some southern maiden, who, from necessity rather than love, had wedded her stern conqueror.

His companion, who might be a year younger than himself, wore a robe of some coarse woollen material, and, in spite of the severity of the season, her arms and neck were bare, except for the circlets of gold she wore

upon each ; her luxuriant hair, which glittered and sparkled in the sun like the purest gold, fell unconfined over her shoulders in masses that were rather wild than disorderly ; her bright blue eyes flashed from beneath their long lashes, and the whole appearance of the little maiden was imperious and commanding, yet irresistibly attractive.

For some time the children played happily enough ; but at last a dispute arose about something the boy wished his companion to do and she would not, and he exclaimed rather passionately :

‘Thou must obey me, Rhunelda, since I am to be thy lord and husband.’

‘My husband, perhaps ; my lord, *never*,’ said Rhunelda defiantly. ‘And if I wed thee at all is still to be seen ; perhaps I may not choose to marry a stranger, as thou art, Eric.’

‘I am not a stranger, Rhunelda,’ said Eric proudly, ‘and that thou knowest.’

‘I know,’ retorted Rhunelda, ‘what old Osric says, about how thou wast brought here when thou wast a babe. Thou art none of ours ; thou knowest my father never calls thee son.’

‘Then why does not thy father send me back to my own people,’ said Eric. ‘I would be with them, for I like thee not when thou art cross, Rhunelda.’

‘Ask my father why he does not send thee back,’ said Rhunelda. ‘Ah ! thou darest not !’

‘I dare !’ said the boy fiercely.

‘Ask him, then, now,’ said Rhunelda ; ‘there he comes along the sand with Wolf. If thou art not afraid, *now* is thy time.’

And Rhunelda looked mischievously and mockingly at her companion from over the edge of the galley, into which she had climbed while they had been talking.

Eric was no coward, and now he had been provoked beyond endurance by Rhunelda's taunts; but he shrank, and involuntarily drew back a step, as the Viking approached them, striding slowly along the beach, wrapped in his bearskin, and holding in his hand his massive war-axe, followed by a large dog, fitly named Wolf, after the grisly animals he so much resembled.

Oscar's face was strangely like his little daughter's there was the same flashing blue eye, the same haughty air, the same golden locks, though age and exposure had worn the Viking's darker; and there was a gloomy, lowering expression on his face, not yet, at least, to be seen on Rhunelda's young features. Even she was awed into silence by his appearance; but if no longer venturing to make her voice heard, her eyes still dared Eric to speak to her father. And Eric stepped forward to meet the Viking, who would have passed by the children without paying them any attention, and who did not look particularly pleased at the interruption, as he asked, somewhat impatiently :

‘What wouldest thou, boy?’

‘Uncle,’ said Eric, for so he had been taught to address the Viking, whatever their relationship to one another might warrant—‘uncle, I have a favour to ask of thee.’

‘And what is it?’ said the Viking, looking not unkindly down upon the handsome boy. ‘Is it that thou wishest to come with me the next time the black raven floats abroad? Thou art too young yet; thou couldest

not defend thyself; thou wouldest only be a trouble and a charge. Play with Rhunelda for yet a few years, and then—'

He was moving on; but Eric exclaimed desperately: 'It is not that I want; I wish to be restored to my people and my home.'

'What, boy?' said Oscar incredulously.

'To go home,' said Eric, 'from where thou hast kept me so long.'

Oscar's forehead contracted, and his eyes flashed fire from beneath their shaggy brows, as he responded harshly:

'Hast thou not here all thou needest?'

'Everything,' said Eric; 'but I will be a free man, and not thy slave!'

'Insolent child!' said Oscar, raising his club threateningly. 'I will chastise thee as thou deservest.'

But Rhunelda, naughty child as she was, had yet a generous heart, and could not bear to see her playfellow punished for what was in a great measure her fault, and springing forward, she caught her father's uplifted hand, exclaiming:

'Oh, father! do not strike him; he only wants to go home because I am cross and will not promise to be his wife.'

But these words only added fuel to Oscar's fury.

'His wife!' he almost shouted. 'Who dares to say that?'

'All the old people,' said Rhunelda, opening her eyes wide in amazement. 'And I will be his wife, too, if I like,' she added defiantly.

'Never!' said her father, and stamped his foot till the

rock rang again. ‘Thou shalt die sooner than marry that base-born slave.’

And he grasped the child’s shoulder until the pain, though it could not draw from her a sound, brought the tears to her eyes.

All Eric’s anger against his playfellow was now gone, and he rushed against the Viking, exclaiming:

‘Let her go, I say—let her go !’

‘Mind thine own work, child,’ said the Viking, throwing him back; ‘and thou’ (to his daughter), I will teach thee better.’

And he lifted Rhunelda in his arms. She struggled violently, like one unused to control of any kind, and not likely to bow to such rough authority as this.

Eric once again made the vain attempt of releasing her. Oscar, exasperated beyond all bounds, struck him so that he fell, and lay for the moment stunned and senseless.

‘Thou hast killed him ! thou hast killed him !’ cried Rhunelda ; and, exerting all her strength, she dealt her father a blow in the face.

From any one else this would have cost a life; but Oscar was less irritated by his daughter’s violence than he had been by Eric’s defiance.

‘Tush, child !’ he said, securing both her hands in one of his. ‘He is no more dead than I am. See !’ And he threw some of the cold salt water from a pool in the rocks over Eric’s face. ‘His colour is returning. But, child,’ he added, his voice growing terribly deep and stern, ‘thou shalt dearly pay this day’s work.’

And holding her so firmly that all resistance, and even all movement, became impossible, he wrapt his

bearskin cloak closely around her, and, followed by his savage attendant, Wolf, strode away with her in his arms along the beach.

Eric raised himself on his elbow, and watched the retreating form of the Viking with an expression of the deepest hatred on his young features.

'Oh!' he exclaimed bitterly, as he got on to his feet, 'if I only had the power to avenge myself, I would—'

'Forgive him!' said a calm, deep voice beside him.

Eric started, and perceived, standing near him, an aged man with a snowy beard, wrapt in a mantle of frieze, with bare sandalled feet, leaning upon a staff, gazing out to sea with a strange, far-away look; and as he pronounced these words, he turned his eyes full upon Eric, and their quiet expression insensibly stilled the angry boy, though his tone was impatient as he said:

'Forgive him? Yes; and what should I gain by it? To be scorned by all about me as a coward, tamely submitting to an insult; to forfeit all my right to be gathered to the brave band of warriors in the halls of Valhalla.'

'Still, thou wouldest be doing right in forgiving him,' said his companion.

'Look what he has done to me,' said Eric, impatiently throwing off the soothing hand that was laid upon his arm; 'look at the blow he gave me!'

'From which, I fear me, thou art suffering,' said the other gently.

'I care not for the pain,' said Eric; 'it is the insult. And then see how he has taken Rhunelda away from me. I know too well where he has gone—to the cave of Freya. He always goes there as soon as the frost is.

sufficiently relaxed to allow of the journey. There he will dedicate her to revenge, and she will despise me for weakly submitting like a slave; and I will not.'

The other sighed. But if Rhunelda was at that moment beyond the reach of his teaching, Eric was still near him; so he made another attempt to soothe his angry companion by saying :

'But, Eric, this is an injury done to thyself alone; for it is not possible that Oscar will harm his daughter. And he has always given thee the protection of a father; has he not by that obtained the right to chastise thee as a son? Look upon it in that way, and I think thou wilt no longer be so wrathful.'

'I have said before,' replied Eric, 'that I care not for the blow; but, look thee, has he not, by keeping me from my kindred, inflicted upon us a mortal insult and injury, that can only be wiped out by blood? Therefore, revenge is a sacred duty with me, and I will fulfil it.' And Eric tossed back his head with proud determination.

His companion said no more. They had now reached a point where it was impossible to pursue the argument further without striking a blow at the root of the whole religion of the Northmen, and *that* he was at present in no condition to do; so he changed the topic by saying :

'It will doubtless be long before Oscar returns; and see, the sun is already low, and thou art in need of repose and food; the blood flows from thy forehead. Come home with me, and thou shalt have something to eat.'

And now, indeed, that the excitement was a little

over; Eric was turning very faint, and when he attempted to move he staggered, and would have fallen had not his companion thrown a protecting arm round him.

They turned towards the cliffs, at this point accessible by means of a narrow gully, which had been worn away by a little streamlet, here joining the ocean in its own wild way, instead of following the usual course of its compeers to the mighty river. A little later it would come, rushing and foaming, through the tiny opening; but now both it, and the bushes that overhung it, were completely frozen, and afforded a means of scaling the cliff, so steep and precipitous, that at first sight it seemed as if even a mountain goat would be puzzled how to ascend it. Nevertheless, Eric and his companion began to climb, the old man moving with far more agility and lightness than might have been expected from his aged appearance; and though as they went farther Eric flagged more and more, until he was wholly leaning for support upon his friend, the old man shrank not, and it was mainly through him that they at last reached the summit and found themselves on the outskirts of the pine forest, at a spot where the farthest sentinels reached so near the edge of the cliff, that when the storms were high, their boughs were frequently wetted by the spray of the angry sea.

Here it was complete twilight; but the old man moved forward with the steady step of one well acquainted with the locality, his arm supporting Eric, though he was himself obliged to lean heavily upon his staff for assistance. In this way they proceeded for a good quarter of a mile inland, always bearing in a

southerly direction, until they suddenly found themselves upon the banks of a tiny pool, which drained into the marsh we have already mentioned. Here a clump of alders threw their bare branches against the sky, and between them and the pool, completely sheltered against every wind, was a small hut, built of pine logs, the interstices of which were filled with dry, sweet gale from the bog close at hand. The roof was of reeds, fastened and secured by shingles. The interior of the hut was bare, almost rude. In one corner was a couch, composed of dry heather, over which was stretched a deer-skin; opposite was a shelf, and—a strange sight in this land of barbarity and war—hanging above it a cross, roughly fashioned from firwood; on the shelf—more wonderful still—lay a parchment book! The third side opposite to the entrance was filled by an oblong box. When a fire was needed by the simple owner of this dwelling, he kindled it either in the centre of his hut or outside, as circumstances dictated.

The old man having at length reached his place of refuge, seated the weary boy upon a large square stone, which, placed just inside the entrance, served as a bench. He then went to the chest, and took from it a flask, from which he poured a few drops into some water. With this he bathed Eric's brow; and though the boy would have disdained to own that he had been in pain, his look of relief was a sufficient reward to his kind host, who next produced some rye-cakes and a preparation of goat's milk, probably intended for his own supper. These he handed to Eric, having first put a little from the same flask into the milk; but though Eric eagerly drank off the beverage, he could not eat.

His host, seeing how sorely he was in need of rest, helped him to take off his upper garment, stiff from the frosty air outside, laid him down on the bed, carefully covering him with the deer-skin. He soon had the satisfaction of seeing his remedies take effect; for, soothed and eased in mind and body, Eric fell into a profound slumber.

While the young sea-king thus rests himself, we will, as a calm conclusion to this somewhat stormy chapter, tell our readers who this man was, thus preaching peace and forgiveness in a land where either quality was lightly esteemed.

Twenty years before the opening of the story, Oscar had carried his marauding bands far to the south, until at length they arrived off the coast of Italy. Here they landed, with the intention of making something of a settlement; but this time they had reckoned without their host. The inhabitants round their proposed colony flew to arms, and, far outnumbering them, succeeded in repelling the Norsemen, who only escaped to their ships with great loss, carrying with them as their sole booty one poor Christian priest.

The enraged and disappointed robbers would have taken his life in revenge for their defeat; but Oscar, whatever he might do later, had not at that time, at any rate, become so savage and cruel as to find comfort for his own losses in the blood of his helpless captives; and he spared Priest John's life, dooming him, however, to a fate which by many would have been regarded as little better than death itself—to be a slave in a distant and barbarous country. But Priest John had in a large measure the Christian virtue of contentment, and he

cheerfully acquiesced in his lot, and served Oscar to the best of his power and abilities.

However, before long it was discovered that he was a Christian, and then the fanatical priests of Odin and Thor called for his blood as a sacrifice to their gods; but once again a seeming chance interposed to save him. Oscar was faithful to the religion of his ancestors, but he was proud—intensely proud—and in this instance his pride came to moderate his zeal. He had taken Priest John under his protection, and he would not give him up; he had said that his captive should live, and the sea-king was not capricious; but though he thus interposed his powerful protection between John and his persecutors, he had lost all his affection for his slave, and treated him with indifference.

Little by little, he was allowed to withdraw himself from his master's service, passing first days, then weeks out of the house, until, as time wore on, he came to live entirely in the little hut where we have found him.

In the course of twenty years, all those who were concerned in the voyage when he was taken captive had died out, or, if they still lived and were active, fresh deeds of war and bloodshed, brilliant, intoxicating success, ‘wore memory of the past away,’ and John was suffered to live in his hermitage forgotten and unmolested. At first he had tried to make converts; but Oscar, whoever else might forget the existence of their Christian prisoner, though he might despise him, never lost sight of him, and seemed to have resolved, as a sort of counterbalance to his generosity in saving his life, to watch and see that he did no mischief by spread-

ing his doctrines ; so at the first appearance of the attempt to teach those about him, Oscar sternly threatened him with instant death unless he at once gave up his preaching.

No one would more willingly, or more gladly have laid down his life in the service of the Master he loved so well ; but he felt that his death at this point would benefit no one, and it was too nearly what he wished, for him to think it would be right to seek it ; so he gave up his hopeless attempt to convert the stern old warriors and patiently bided his time, passing his days in praying for the fierce heathens about him, in meditating, and studying the Gospel of St. Matthew, a parchment which he had saved when his monastery was sacked, and which ever since had been his greatest comfort.

And now at last, after these dark years, the time that he had been waiting for seemed to be drawing near. Eric and Rhunelda made great friends with him ; the children often met him in their rambles, and the kindly priest was one to win their hearts ; he told them tales of the wild animals, with whom in his solitary silent life he had made acquaintance, mingling his tales with lessons of peace, forgiveness and truth, as he saw his hearers were able to bear them. He never ventured openly to preach Christianity ; they were too young to make a choice, or to understand it, and Oscar watched him with a jealous eye ; but he carefully prepared the ground and sowed the seed, and waited patiently, with the prayerful hope, that he might one day reap the fruit of his labours.

CHAPTER II.

‘ He paused ; the word the vassals took.
With forward step and fiery look,
On high their naked brands they shook,
Their clattering targets wildly strook,
And first in murmur low,
Then like the billow in his course,
That far to seaward finds his source,
And flings to shore his mustered force,
Burst in loud roar their answer hoarse,
“ Woe to the traitor, woe ! ” ’

SIR W. SCOTT—*Lady of the Lake*.

LONG lasted Eric’s sleep, and long and patiently watched by him his kind host, first beguiling the time with his cherished book, then, when it grew too dark for this exercise, he sat with his hands folded, lost in meditation, perhaps in prayer. When the boy at last opened his eyes, his first inquiry was where he was, his next, what might be the hour. John went to the opening of the hut, and examined the skies, now thickly studded with stars.

‘ It must be past seven of the evening,’ he said.

‘ Oscar will have been back long ago,’ exclaimed Eric, springing up, ‘ I must home at once.’

‘ Wilt not rest till morning ? ’ said his entertainer.

‘ Thanks, no,’ said Eric. ‘ I am quite fresh, and I will not have Rhunelda say that I kept away because I was afraid.’

‘ But thou wilt be patient ? ’ said John doubtfully.

‘ If Rhunelda is not cross,’ said Eric, laughing, but in a very different way to what he had done before his

sleep ; his expression was bright, and all traces of his anger, evanescent as it was violent, had disappeared. ‘Yes, I will try, because you ask me, and you are always good ; but,’ he added gravely, ‘you must not ask me to forgive him, for that I cannot do.’

John sighed, but it was a sigh that ended in a smile ; he could not despair of his pupil while the boy showed such affection towards himself ; here was love, the first germ of all that was good—so he again looked to Eric’s bruise, which was now very much less inflamed, and told him to let him see it again soon, should it be at all painful. This Eric promised to do, saying he would come again the next day and bring Rhunelda with him, if she were anything like in a good temper. John laughed, for Eric’s merry manner was infectious, and hoped that the boy would reach home without misadventure.

‘No fear of that,’ laughed Eric ; ‘the distance is short ; but do not thou, father, come into the cold—farewell.’

And Eric bounded joyously away, like the free-hearted young sea-king he was.

It was a lovely night ; the stars shone with the brilliancy peculiar to northern climes, and the pines, each with its snow-crowned top, stretched as far as eye could reach in either direction. A solemn silence reigned in the wood—there was no sound except where perchance a branch, aided by the power of that day’s sun, shook itself free from its load of snow, which fell with a dull thud on the ground beneath.

Eric had something of the poet’s temperament ; the scene impressed him strongly, and he involuntarily slackened his steps. But this was neither time nor

place to indulge in fanciful dreams, nor in excessive admiration of the beauties of nature. A cold frosty wind was blowing; the underwood in places was thick—at any point a wolf might be concealed, ready to rush out on the unwary traveller; and Eric, much refreshed as he had been by his sleep, did not feel equal to an encounter with the savage denizens of the forest.

He pressed forward accordingly until he arrived at a spot near the edge of the cliff, where, the trees being thinner, he obtained a view of the sea: then he stood still and uttered a cry of admiration. There it lay before him, the broad ocean glimmering beneath the wintry sky! The little waves rolled up one after another to the shore, and Eric fancied he could catch the reflection of the stars in each crest. The stillness was broken by the rustle of the water as it washed the foot of the cliff, but no living being was to be seen or heard: nature had not yet awakened from the sleep of winter. The solitary spectator became conscious, from a chilliness in all his limbs, that he could no longer expose himself with safety to the night air. He turned to the right in the direction of Oscar's dwelling, which stood out black against the sparkling heavens, but as he advanced and by degrees obtained a view of the front of the house, he became conscious of a lurid light shining from within through the broad opening that served for a door.

'Oscar is keeping festival,' he muttered, and pressed eagerly forward. His opinion was confirmed when, on arriving at the palisade which surrounded the dwelling, he found the gate wide open. The palisade would have been but a frail defence against an enemy, but it

was rather for show than for actual use, for the northmen never looked to the possibility of their having to defend their homes against a foreign foe. Had such a contingency arisen, they would probably have taken to their ships, and quitting their dwellings without a sigh of regret, would either have sought a new place of settlement on a more undisturbed part of their own coasts, or else have striven to establish themselves by conquest on some more fertile and favoured shore.

Eric, on passing the palisade, found himself in a moderate sized court, two sides of which were occupied by sheds of a rude description, while exactly opposite to him was the main building—a low irregular structure of considerable length, though of only one storey. Eric entered a primitive kind of hall, the supports and beams of which were of firwood, with the bark still unshorn; for three feet from the surface of the ground the walls were of unwrought stone, but above this to the roof was wattle-work. The roof itself was composed of birch willow laid transversely to the pine-beams—but the whole was so blackened with smoke that it was impossible to distinguish the materials or the form in which they were used.

In the centre of the hall blazed a huge fire, and round it was collected a group of warriors; but there was no sign of mirth or revelry—all was sombre and stern. The men themselves were wild and fierce, with shaggy hair; they were wrapt either in wolf or bear skin, and as it was time of peace, they bore no weapons but their huge axes and shields. At the end of the hall, where in later times would be situated the daïs, stood a group of older men, the fathers of the band: their hair was

gray, and many of them bore scars from old wounds; but the fierceness of their eyes was yet undimmed, and their strength very little impaired by age. They were talking in low earnest tones, and from time to time they threw impatient glances towards the other entrance into the hall, that led into the interior of the house.

Near this entrance was placed a kind of rude table made of a single plank, supported at either end by blocks of stone, and at this table stood a most singular looking old man: he was wrapt in a mantle made of the skin of a polar bear—a rare article of dress at that time—but his cloak was scarcely whiter than his hair and beard; his eyebrows and lashes were of the same snowy hue; his eyes, of a light blue, sparkled with a wild expression that at times amounted almost to insanity. They were the only pieces of colour about his person or dress, for his cheeks and even his hands looked bloodless. He was muttering to himself in a strange excited way; ever and anon he struck his hand upon the board beside him.

It was Lang, priest of Thor and Freija. Rarely seen outside the cave in the far distant mountains where he dwelt solitary, his appearance now had something of awful portent in it, judging from the anxious faces of the warriors beside him, who by their subdued voices appeared to respect his meditations, even while they carefully avoided nearer intercourse with him.

Eric looked round on this scene in wonderment, then, turning to one of those next him, he asked, in a low tone:

‘What is the meaning of this?’

'I know not,' said the man addressed, 'but scarce an hour ago we were all summoned here by Oscar's command, no reason given.'

'Oscar is then at home?' said Eric; low as he spoke, his voice was heard by the enthusiast, who cast a wild glance round the assembly, exclaiming:

'Where is the coward that speaks now? where?'

Eric's blood rushed to his face, and he would have sprung forward in eager vindication, but his neighbour laid a not unfriendly grasp upon his arm:

'Hush!' he said, 'wouldest brawl in Oscar's own hall? silence, or go out.'

Eric would stay and see all, and his companion, on his promising to remain quiet, released him, good-naturedly interposing his person and buckler so as to shield the boy from observation. But now there was a stir on the farther side of the hall, and Oscar entered, leading Rhunelda, clad completely in white, with no other ornament than her long golden hair, and a girdle of silver and scarlet threads curiously twisted.

At the entrance of their leader, the band set up a wild and discordant yell, accompanied with clashing of their battle-axes against their bucklers till the roof rang again. A girl much older than Rhunelda might well have been terrified at the savage sights and sounds; but Rhunelda was a true child of her father: her colour did not change, nor did her eye falter, neither did she tighten her grasp upon her parent's hand.

Oscar waited till the noise had a little subsided before he spoke, and the instant his voice was heard, there was a deep stillness in the hall; his tones were full and rich, and now that he spoke in elevated strains, they

had lost that harshness and abruptness that distinguished them in ordinary conversation :

‘Friends, brothers, I have called you together to-day on a solemn occasion ! Fate has denied me a son ; when I die, the name of Oscar, and the names of all those glorious heroes that it represents, will perish with me, and the sons of the north will no longer be led by the descendant of Thor.’

A deep hollow sound resembling a groan ran through the assembly.

‘But,’ continued Oscar, ‘I have a daughter, and I purpose that she shall be a glory to her father’s name ; she shall forget that she has the weak frame of a woman, and remember that she is the child of the warrior-god. Is my purpose good, friends ?’

They expressed their approbation by wild shouts and clashing of their arms ; then an old man near Oscar spoke :

‘Thou art right, O Oscar ! thine intention is good ; thy child shall be a glory to her race, and she shall behave herself as becomes one who counts among her fathers Ericon, Thorguld and Olaf, whose ships sought far distant countries, and before whom the sons of the stranger bowed and fled ; and when thou art called hence, O Oscar, to the halls of Walhalla, thy child shall have the honour of avenging thee—an honour so great, that it is accorded to none but those of greatest fame and highest courage.’

He spoke with the authority of age, and no one ventured to gainsay or to make an objection ; but after a pause of a minute or so, one said :

‘By what discipline, Oscar, wilt thou make thy child

fit to bear the part thou designest for her?—for though her heart be brave, her body is that of a weak woman.'

'Habit does everything,' replied Oscar, 'and I purpose that from henceforth she shall come with us when we sail, that she shall be trained in all martial exercises, and that she shall by long use become accustomed to the sight of death. What say you, counsellor and priest of Thor and Freija ?'

'I say,' replied the old man we have before mentioned, drawing himself upright, and looking around with a glance of almost wild insanity, 'that the daughter of Oscar shall lead her people to victory; that her course shall be dazzling, like the sun at noonday; that under her the bough which for a time appeared dry and withered, shall blossom afresh and be fruitful; that great as has been, and shall be, the glory of Oscar, the glory of his daughter and her faithful adherents shall exceed it as much as the light of the sun does that of the waning moon. And doubly cursed be he who fails to follow and to serve her; let him die the death of a traitor and a coward!'

Whatever doubts and vexatious feelings at being thus called upon to follow a woman any of the party might before have entertained, they were at once put to flight by this decided speech from one who was revered as a prophet and a priest. Loud and deep were the oaths of fealty to the little girl, who still, almost unconscious of the lot thus carved out for her, stood there smiling in her childish beauty.

Lang took both her hands, and Oscar drew back that he might not appear in any way to influence her.

'Wilt thou, Rhunelda, promise,' said Lang, 'to devote thyself to the fate destined for thee, to follow glory and revenge wherever they may lead thee, unto death itself? Wilt thou never shrink from danger? Wilt thou always remember whose child thou art? Wilt thou do all this?'

'I will,' answered Rhunelda, in a clear, firm voice, that rang through the hall, and without showing the least fear of the stern, ascetic who was holding her.

'It is enough!' cried the Northmen. 'We believe her! We accept her!'

But Lang shook his head.

'Words are but empty sounds,' he said. 'We must put it to the proof.'

He drew from his girdle a small, glittering knife, with which he cut a deep gash in Rhunelda's arm.

The child uttered not a sound, nor did a muscle of her face move, though the pain must have been sharp, and the fast-flowing blood stained her white robe.

Once again there was a deep cry of admiration, and Lang's stern features relaxed.

'Thou art worthy; thou dost not fear pain,' he said. 'And now,' raising his voice to a loud and piercing scream, 'I devote thee to glory and to revenge; to fight by thy father's side while he is with thee, and after he is gone from thee to avenge his death. Thor shall be with thee and strengthen thy weak arm; and as thy foes fall fast before thee, they shall feel that, though the blows are dealt by a woman, they come with the full force of the warrior god. Take this' (he thrust his dagger into her belt); 'it has never yet failed to bring victory with it. Lang has spoken; he that refuses to follow, let him die the death!'

He suddenly released Rhunelda's hands, and rushing from the hall, was soon lost in the outer darkness, while far and wide resounded the shouts of Oscar's followers.

Rhunelda sprang to her father, who lifted her in his arms, so that her golden hair mingled with his, and there was a strange, lurid light of triumph in his deep eyes.

Eric's feelings during this scene had been various; first there had been astonishment, then anger at Rhunelda's thus taking part in a ceremony in which he was not included; but when he saw her blood flow, he uttered a cry of indignation and horror, and would have rushed to her aid, but the Northman next him, whom we have already noticed as entertaining a friendly feeling towards the boy, laid a hand over his mouth, saying, in a low, hasty tone :

' She must bear it. Wouldst run thine own head against a wall ? ' He retained his grasp upon the boy, for though fierce and wild as his neighbours, he had no wish to see the ceremony completed by the sacrifice of Eric's life ; and death had been the boy's certain fate had he interrupted on so solemn an occasion as this.

By the time all was over, Eric had had leisure to reflect, and he felt, with his friendly detainer, that it would be anything but safe to present himself before the Viking, on whose stern features there now lay a moody expression, which warned all who knew him that it were best not to cross his will ; therefore, as no feasting was to follow this meeting, but all were separating quietly and decorously, he formed the resolution of leaving the hall with the crowd, and then, by entering at another door, to slip unperceived to his own little apartment. But he was not to escape so easily.

Oscar's keen eye let nothing pass ; he had perceived Eric when first he entered the hall, had kept his eye on him, and an attentive observer might have noted a scornful smile that curled his lip when Eric's neighbour was loudest in his applause that he might drown any disapproving sound made by the boy ; and now, as Eric was about to leave the hall, Oscar addressed him in tones of biting scorn :

‘So, Eric, thou hast come home again ?’

Though Oscar's accents were such as to make Eric's blood boil, he remembered his promise, and answered quietly :

‘Yes ; dost thou want me ?’

‘I wish to speak with thee,’ replied Oscar ; ‘but thou must come nearer—I am not in the custom of shouting what I have to say.’

Eric accordingly stepped forward, and there was a murmur of admiration at the sight of him, with his free, upright bearing and handsome face, though that face was now pale, and bore the marks of Oscar's chastisement but too plainly.

The Sea-king heard the murmur, and it called forth a deeper frown upon his face. Eric was in some sort Rhunelda's rival, and he hastened to remove the favourable impression produced by the boy upon his followers.

‘Art more tamed than when I saw thee on the beach ?’ he asked.

Eric raised his head proudly.

‘I know not what thou meanest by “more tamed.” I do not know what wrong I did that merited thy punishment ; but since thou must rule and I obey, I

am sorry for whatever I did that called forth thy blow.'

Once again there was an admiring whisper.

'I thank thee,' said Oscar indifferently. 'And, now that thou art brought to a better mind, what thinkest thou of what we have just done?'

'It was very grand,' said Eric.

'Speak plainly, boy,' said Oscar haughtily; 'I understand not riddles. Wouldest thou, too, be dedicated to Thor, and follow the brave steps of our race?'

'In what manner?' asked Eric.

'As Rhunelda was just now—devote thyself to Thor and to revenge.'

Twelve hours before Eric would have embraced such an offer with the greatest joy, and even now he was about to give an eager affirmative. He suddenly checked himself. Something within him—he knew not what—powerfully impelled him to return a negative, and he answered quietly, but very firmly:

'No; I will follow thee, even unto death, but I will not be dedicated to revenge.'

'And wherefore not?' said Oscar, with incredulous scorn.

'Because,' said Eric, speaking almost, as it were, by inspiration, 'because it is blessed to forgive.'

A low, deep hiss ran through the hall. Oscar was satisfied. For the time, at the least, Eric's credit was over with his rude followers, and he contented himself by saying, half apologetically:

'You see, friends, what manner of boy it is that would propose himself as my daughter's husband. Shall it be so?'

The answer was given with almost a frenzied shout :
‘ Never ! Never shall the daughter of the brave
Sea-king wed a coward who is so base as to forgive an
injury ! ’

Eric’s cheeks burned, he clenched his hands ; but the same power that, in spite of himself, had made him answer thus, withheld him from giving any outward sign of his emotion, and he stood quietly while Oscar said, with cold scorn :

‘ Thou hadst best go to thy bed, boy ; with morning may return thy scattered courage.’

And Eric darted from the apartment to the little cell in the wall which served him as a sleeping chamber, and flung himself upon his hard bed in a passion of tears. But through all his choking sobs there rose a vision of John’s quiet face smiling upon him ; he felt, without understanding why, that he had done that which would call forth an expression of gladness upon those pale features ; and when at last he fell asleep, worn out with the violence of his grief, there was a strangely peaceful look upon his flushed face—it was as if some of his master’s calm spirit had breathed over his troubled heart.

From this time there was a change in the children. They never spoke of this day’s occurrence, and when they met on the following morning, they played together as heretofore ; but while Eric drew more and more to John, and listened with ever-increasing attention to his lessons, Rhunelda started haughtily aside whenever the good priest taught of gentleness and humility. It seemed as if that walk with her father had wholly altered her nature, and that from being a spoilt and somewhat im-

perious child, she had suddenly become a woman, with a fixed, resolute purpose. But while grieving over her pride and inflexibility, John, with his usual loving manner, seeking the best side of everything, felt that there were the germs of a noble character in her determination to do her duty and fulfil her destiny at whatever cost, and that if once that proud spirit were humbled, the energy and courage which were now so wrongly directed might well form the basis of a martyr's endurance for his faith. Strengthening himself with these reflections, he braced himself for the present task of instructing Eric, who now listened so willingly to his lessons that he ventured to teach him to read, and to impart to him some of the truths of the Christian religion.

Thus passed the summer: the Northmen went forth on their expedition, and returned in the autumn with their booty. Another spring came, and now Rhunelda was to accompany her father.

Oscar coldly, and as a matter of course, gave Eric the offer of coming with him on the former terms, and once again, though the boy promised to devote himself in life and death to the cause of Oscar, but with a moral courage that ought to command respect he refused to be included in the terrible band of revenge-seekers, and Oscar repudiated him with scorn.

This was more than poor Eric could bear, and he resolved to run away, and if he could not succeed in joining some one of the numerous bands that yearly issued from their Northern haunts, to die in the forest rather than longer to expose himself to such insults as were daily heaped upon him.

There was no guile in his nature. It never occurred

to him that by waiting until Oscar and his followers had departed he should run a better chance of finally escaping ; he set off at once in the heat of his passion, and from an unwillingness to implicate John in his flight, he did not inform even his kind friend of his intention.

The boy's absence discovered, Oscar at once sent after him, and, of course, he was soon overtaken and brought back. There was a long and stormy meeting between the uncle and nephew (for so, following the custom of all about, we name them), to which no one was witness ; but Eric was sent away into the forest, in the charge of two stout Northmen, and for many years Rhunelda never heard the name of her old playfellow, nor had the least clue as to what might have become of him.

John drooped silently. At first it did seem hard that he should be allowed to live on while everything that was worth living for was taken from him ; but soon he looked patiently up again. No doubt all was sent him for some wise purpose—all would be clear in good time.

CHAPTER III.

' What cares disturb the mighty dead ?
Each honour'd rite was duly paid ;
No daring hand thy helm unlaced,
Thy sword, thy shield were near thee placed,
Thy flinty couch no tear profaned,
Without with hostile blood was stained,
Within 'twas lined with moss and fern ;
Then rest thee, dweller of the cairn.'

SIR W. SCOTT—*Harold the Dauntless.*

SEVEN years have passed away since we introduced our readers to the castle of Oscar, the Sea-king ; seven years,

that seem to have left but little trace on the inhabitants of either mansion or village. It is true that many warriors have fallen in the distant forays, but their places have been supplied by their comrades; old men can no longer bear the sword, but their sons are ready to take up the massive weapon as it falls from their father's feeble hand. But still, as we approach Oscar's dwelling, there is surely an air of greater desolation, a more entire solitude, than when we first made acquaintance with it. But yonder, on that distant hill-top on the farther side of the estuary, there is a large group assembled, doubtless called together by some religious rite or solemn duty.

We will take an author's privileged powers of locomotion, and without troubling ourselves about the means of crossing the estuary, we will at once spring across and land ourselves among the group on the farther hill-side. The assembly is mostly composed of aged warriors, women and children, and all faces wear an expression of the deepest sadness; by pressing through the crowd a little, we find that they are standing round an open grave, and by listening to their low fierce ejaculations we learn that they are mourning their leader Oscar—fallen, not in fair fight, by the hand of an open foe, but slain by base treachery, decoyed by the pretence of a friendly parley, by one of his own neighbours and countrymen, and then murdered; and mixed with the grief was the desire for vengeance. There was the dejected feeling, the uncertainty incidental to their having lost their chief and being ignorant of the number of their foes.

And now, winding slowly up from the banks of the

estuary came the funeral procession. First stepped ten or twelve girls with dishevelled hair wailing for the dead with piercing shrieks ; but though they strove to mingle with their lament the fierce exulting hope that Oscar was now feasting high among the heroes of his race in the halls of Walhalla, there was fear and distress painted on their countenances ; the hand that had struck down Oscar, might it not soon menace them ?

Behind these maidens came the remnants of Oscar's band, that according to custom had accompanied him half-way to the place of rendezvous, and there halting had escaped the fatal snare. Many of their faces wore an expression of deep shame ; had not their leader died, and they got off safe and free ?

Next to this band of warriors moved six tall men, the sole survivors of Oscar's companions, who by desperate fighting had succeeded in bearing off their beloved chief's body, that they now had the privilege they so well deserved of carrying to its last long home.

They bore the corpse aloft on their shoulders, wrapt in the wolfskin cloak that was Oscar's usual garment in life ; the face and breast were left uncovered, and on the last was plainly visible the deep gash of the mortal wound.

Behind her father's body came Rhunelda, with firm step and undimmed eye. She wore a long loose robe of woollen material, and over this a short body or corselet, made of links of steel ; her golden hair flowed far below her waist, and in her hand she held a sword. Her cheek was pale, but her head was erect, and her lips firmly

set. Bringing up the rear were the reserve of the band of Oscar, wild-looking Northmen, well meriting the title of barbarians ; every face was downcast, though according to custom no one disturbed the repose of the dead by weeping. And now the maidens who headed the procession had reached the top of the hill and mingled with the crowd of women and aged men there assembled ; and as they joined them, those waiting on the hillside raised their voices to swell the shrieks of the wailers : it was as if they thus found vent for the grief they had been so long suppressing.

By degrees, the rest of the procession found their way to their proper places, and the customary rites took place ; before committing their chief's corpse to the ground, the bearers raised it in an erect position, so that all around might have a view of the face and of the wound that had caused the death.

A deep shuddering groan ran through the assembly at the spectacle ; then the face was muffled in the cloak, and the body was lowered into the grave. They then first threw in a layer of dried bracken and heather, next filled it up with mould until it was even with the soil around, then every warrior stepped forward and placed a stone upon the grave, until the cairn rose to a height that might be seen for some distance out to sea.

The ceremony so far completed, Lang's successor, a pale young man, stood forth and spoke on the merits of the deceased, and on their duty to avenge him ; but he was nervous, his speech sounded cold, and the Northmen stood round with dejected mien, and the air of men who know not what to do or whom to follow. At length Rhunelda, who for some time had been standing

with her eyes bent upon the ground, looked up, her cheek kindled and her eyes flashed, and she spoke with a voice clear as a trumpet-call :

‘ Fathers and brothers!—for shall I not, having lost my own sire, find a father in every aged man, a brother in every warrior?—will ye desert me in my need? will ye make me feel that I am indeed an orphan? Rhunelda seeks for vengeance on her father’s base murderers. Years ago ye vowed to follow me; I release ye from your oath; I will have none with me who are not prepared to go even unto death in the pursuit of vengeance.’

There was a thrill and a murmur through the crowd; Rhunelda perceived it, and with the quickness of one born to lead and to control she exclaimed :

‘ Will ye come with me, or must I wander alone through morass and through forest, until I can plunge this sword’ (and she struck the weapon on the ground) ‘ into mine enemy’s breast.’

‘ We will follow thee to death, brave daughter of Oscar!’ cried a hundred voices, while a wild enthusiasm fired the throng. A proud smile lit up Rhunelda’s face. It was a scene worthy of an artist. The fierce Northmen, with their unkempt hair and beards, and scowling expression, now rapidly changing to one of almost fanatical hate and eagerness, as they looked towards the slight figure standing on a stone that elevated her a trifle above the crowd; her long hair streaming like a banner upon the wind; while the beams of the western sun gleamed fiercely upon her steel corselet.

Suddenly a very old man stepped forth from the crowd and spoke; his voice was low, and could scarcely

be heard beyond the circle of those immediately surrounding him, as he asked Rhunelda if she meant to marry, and if so, who she would give as a ruler to her people.

'Never! never!' replied Rhunelda, with an accent of scorn in her voice. 'Never! I have been brought up to lead, not to obey; I will fight in the first rank in battle, but never will I give up my power by wedding another.'

There was a shout of admiration and assent, for though they would have obeyed the least command, fulfilled the most capricious wish of their adored leader's daughter, they shrank from submitting to a stranger; and Rhunelda would probably have lost all control over them, had they supposed that by marrying she would share her power with another, and thus impose upon them the yoke of an alien. Her resolution therefore to remain single gave her unbounded popularity. She gathered up her hair with her hand, continuing: 'I will forget that I am a woman, and cut off these useless locks.'

She would have run her sword through them, but the old man who had spoken before interrupted her:

'No, no!' he exclaimed, 'keep them on, beloved of the gods; they shall be to thy people like a banner, ever leading them onward, onward, higher, higher; where is seen the gleam of that golden hair, there shall victory await the sons of the North!'

Rhunelda let loose her hair, saying:

'I take thine advice, father. And now, my friends, this is no time to waste in mourning or in feasting; I beg ye all to come to my house, where, mingling with

the funeral-banquet for my father, we must hold high council as to what means are to be taken for defending ourselves and avenging him. It cannot be supposed that the enemies who slew him will be content with one victory ; no, they will soon be here to finish their work of extermination. Fathers, I beg your advice. Brothers, the aid of your arms.'

She moved slowly down the hill, followed by the whole train of warriors. The rest of the assembly, as the sun had now set, and it was growing chilly, dispersed to their homes with lighter hearts, it is true, but not without grave anxiety for the future. And the mighty sea-king was left alone in his repose, on the top of the hill.

CHAPTER IV.

'What dost thou here, my friend ?
He was thy bitterest enemy ;
That he hath found his meed,
Thou shouldst rejoice and be exceedingly glad !

'Truly thou say'st that to his latest breath,
He was mine enemy, and hated me ;
But with those who are in the icy grasp of death
The living man should have no strife or quarrel.

AMONG those attending the obsequies of Oscar the sea-king was a young man, who seemed as if he were *with* the rest of his fellow-mourners, rather than *of* them. He was enveloped in a deerskin cloak, with the flap of which he concealed the lower part of his face. He stood a little apart from the main group of wailers, and

had not all been so absorbed by their grief or their fears, he must have attracted attention. As it was, he was observed with something like suspicion by one of the old men there, who was on the point of asking who or what the stranger was, when the arrival of the funeral procession riveted every eye.

Then the stranger drew nearer, always however taking the precaution to keep his features hidden from view. Had any one during the ceremony of Oscar's burial had his thoughts sufficiently disengaged to be able to watch his motions with critical attention, the young man's behaviour would certainly have drawn his notice. He seemed to be regarding everything with a suppressed though intense interest, until Rhunelda spoke, and then he raised his head sharply and listened to her eagerly, and when he heard her determination never to marry, he heaved a deep sigh, and his head sunk forward upon his breast.

As soon as the ceremony was concluded, and while every one was still absorbed in watching, he moved rapidly and noiselessly forward, until he reached a spot where the forest grew down to the edge of the cliff; here he plunged into the wood, and was in a few seconds lost to sight among the thickly-growing trees.

And now it was midnight: the moon and the stars kept their quiet watch above; below, was only heard the rustle of the sea, as it beat ceaselessly against the rock. On one side lay the estuary, black in the uncertain light; and on the farther shore an attentive eye might from time to time, between the reeds and brushwood that bordered the river, and among which the village was built, perceive a sudden bright light, as if

a torch was borne along, and by listening attentively, the faintest far-off hum might be heard: the Northmen were on the alert, preparing for an expedition.

But here, up on the lonely hill-top, all was solemnly still, and as the wanderer stepped forth from the shadow of the trees and stood beside the cairn, he heard no sound but the whistle of the wind among the pine-branches, and the distant murmur of the ocean. His cloak was now thrown back and displayed the well-built figure of a youth of about twenty, with dark sparkling eyes, and a handsome thoughtful face. His only weapon was a long knife stuck in his belt, and on the hilt of this he kept his hand. It was plain that though his intentions here were peaceful, he was conscious of being surrounded by enemies, against whom it was necessary to be constantly upon his guard.

His expression as he thus stood gazing on the cairn of the sea-king, at first showed an almost gloomy satisfaction; but it gradually softened, and when at last he exclaimed in a low tone: 'Well! well! after all I owe a great deal to him; but for his eare, I should scarcely be alive now,' there was something very like a tear trembling on his lashes.

At this moment there were sounds of some one rapidly ascending the hill. He started, and involuntarily grasped his dagger tighter, but in a few moments he was convinced that it was the hurried step of a woman or a fugitive. Nevertheless he deemed it prudent to again withdraw into the wood, from whence he had a full view of the open space round the cairn, and could at any instant make his escape, should need

arise, by going deeper into the forest, where it would be scarcely possible, especially by night, to track him.

Nearer and nearer came the steps, and at last Rhunelda sprang into sight, with quick panting breath after her run up the steep hill. With one bound she was beside her father's grave, where she stood looking intently down upon it for one moment, her face as white as marble in the pale moonbeams; then nature asserted her sway even over that proud heart, and with one bitter cry of 'Oh! father, father!' she sank upon the ground with her head resting against the cold stones, among which her hair twisted in and out, till it looked like the threads of gold embroidery. Poor Rhunelda! this had been a hard time for her. She had shed no tear when her father's bloody corpse lay before her, but firmly braced herself to the task of rallying the fainting spirits round her, and once again making of an uncertain multitude a band strong and ready to do and to dare. She had succeeded, and now for the moment her work was over; for, proud though she was, and conscious of ability to think and to act, she nevertheless had sufficient humility to be aware that in the present crisis there was needed experience such as she did not possess, and she deserved credit for the deft way in which, having roused her people, she yielded to wiser and older men the task of deciding what was right and best to be done; therefore, though she had given the first impetus, the measures to be taken had been arranged by the grey-haired councillors of the tribe.

And now all was settled for the present, and all had retired, either to rest, or to fulfil the duties that had

fallen upon them ; but a burning desire came over Rhunelda once more to stand beside her father's grave, and she had started alone to visit it.

She was not afraid of the intense solitude, nor of seeing anything supernatural, for though a devout believer in all the superstitions of her country, Rhunelda was totally without fear ; and though, according to what she had been taught, she felt that her tears by her father's tomb were wrong, that she was interrupting his feasting at Odin's board, she recked not ; and had her weeping, as she believed to be quite possible, called her father back from the world of spirits to reproach her with having disturbed his repose, she would, while asking his pardon for the wrong she had done him, have entreated his advice and counsel in her perilous position.

Thus she wept on ; her arms crossed above her forehead, giving no sign of life or movement, except when now and then the cold sea-breeze waved her hair backwards and forwards.

The solitary wanderer had been no unmoved spectator of her grief ; he had come forth from the sheltering wood, and seemed to be watching her, as if he would fain have brought her consolation had he known how ; but when he saw her kneel motionless beside the stone, he became seriously alarmed. Stepping close beside her, he said in a low tone, 'Rhunelda.' She started, but did not raise her head ; were it a vision, she would not offend the immortal by looking up before she received leave to do so, and she replied in a muffled tone :

'Who is it that calls me ?'

'I, Rhunelda ; I would fain speak with thee,' replied

the stranger in such unmistakably human accents that she looked up quickly to see who addressed her. When she perceived the young man, she sprang to her feet with a momentary fear ; she was alone, far away from any aid, here on the hillside, with one who from his general appearance she saw to be a stranger :

‘ What wouldest thou ? ’ she said, standing with head erect at a little distance from him .

‘ Dost thou not know me, Rhunelda ? ’ said the young man. ‘ I am Eric, thine old playfellow.’

She seemed to recognise him.

‘ Ah ! ’ she said coldly, ‘ what wouldest thou here ? ’

‘ I have come, Rhunelda,’ said Eric earnestly, ‘ to show my respect for thy father, and to comfort thee, my poor Rhunelda, if thou wilt permit me.’

‘ To comfort me ! ’ said Rhunelda incredulously ; ‘ I need no such comfort. And is that all thou wishest here ? ’

‘ I wish to speak with thee,’ said Eric patiently ; ‘ thou wilt hear me, Rhunelda ? ’

‘ Thou must be quick then,’ said Rhunelda, seating herself upon a stone ; ‘ it is long past midnight ; and as soon as the sun rises, I must be away to head my people.’

‘ I will speak as briefly as I can,’ said Eric pleadingly, and chilled by the cold eye with which she regarded him ; he had expected a woman melting with old kindness and goodwill towards him, and he found himself in front of a judge, impartial and hard as the rocks around him.

‘ Years ago,’ he said, ‘ Oscar the sea-king went forth to take vengeance upon Holdar, a rover who lived

twenty miles farther to the south, on the sea-coast. Holdar himself was away from home, and his wife and young brother ventured to defend his dwelling against the renowned Oscar ; the fight was a long one, but it ended in the slaughter of the warriors and the burning of the castle. While the stern Northmen stood by, enjoying the sight of their victory ; while the flames rose in a glowing column to heaven ; while the beams cracked and the roof blazed like flax, a female figure stood out clear, beside one of the crumbling windows. It was Gunhilda, Holdar's wife : she called down the vengeance of heaven upon Oscar, cried to the fate maidens to pursue him with fury ; to the ravens to pick his bones. Gunhilda was very beautiful, and as she stood there, her long dark hair streaming upon the wind, all were struck with admiration ; and Oscar sprang forward to save her from a fiery death, but with a shrieking laugh she threw the babe into the sea-king's arms, telling him to revenge himself on that, for she was beyond his reach, and plunged into the flames. Oscar was not cruel ; far from wishing the blood of the helpless babe, he caught it in his arms, and carefully tending it, brought it home with him to be a companion to his own little girl. Rhunelda, that woman was my mother ; I was that child !

' All this I knew long ago,' said Rhunelda, with a hard dry voice.

' Thou knowest,' continued Eric, ' for what cause thy father sent me from his dwelling. He did not, as many believed at the time, send me to perish in the forest, but to the house of an uncle in the interior, where I lived till the other day, when I heard that my

grandfather, my mother's father, is still alive, though where they could not tell me, and I have set out with the firm intention of finding him ! He paused.

'Finish thy story,' said Rhunelda, 'and say that some of thine uncle's followers were foremost in the attack upon my father.'

'Yes,' said Eric sadly ; 'I own, to my shame and grief, that such indeed was the case ; but I prompted them not, and I deeply regret it !'

'Regret it !' said Rhunelda in amazement ; 'it is but revenge.'

'But I am bound not to take revenge,' said Eric quietly.

'And wherefore not ?' said his astonished companion.

'Because I am a Christian !' said Eric firmly.

'A what ?' exclaimed Rhunelda scornfully. 'My father hated and despised them ; he said that they were making cowards of all the men, and that there would soon be left not a warrior in the whole breadth of the land that would fight as they did in the good old times. If thou art a Christian, begone from my sight !' And she turned her back upon him.

'Rhunelda,' said Eric very patiently, though his colour was high, 'thou knowest not what thou art saying. Listen to me : Thou canst not fight like a man ; it is impossible ; thou hast not the strength. Were a champion to oppose thee, thou wouldest be thrown down at once, thou couldest not stand one moment. Rhunelda, I love thee dearly ; I have come a long way to seek and to save thee. Thou art pursuing a fearful path in thy mad thirst for vengeance. Come, let us flee

away together, and leave all this behind us. Forget not altogether the lessons we learnt long ago of John !

Rhunelda's eyes flashed :

'Get thee gone,' she said, 'and thank the old friendship that I had for thee, that I set not my followers after thee. Thou hast had thy revenge upon me, what more dost thou want ?'

'Rhunelda,' said Eric gently, 'thou knowest that the old feud has not been closed, that blood has not yet been paid for blood, that the reason my uncle's men joined in the attack upon thy father was not to avenge my mother's death, but because he unjustly detained a piece of land belonging to their leader; therefore, according to the laws of Odin and Thor, the forfeit has yet to be paid, the revenge yet to be taken.'

'Then take it now,' cried Rhunelda passionately, baring her throat and chest; 'plunge thy dagger into my heart, and rest assured that when the daughter's blood flows over the father's cairn, thy mother's spirit will have nothing more to disturb her in her deep repose.'

'Heaven forbid,' said Eric very gravely, 'that I should commit so great a crime ! No, Rhunelda, my revenge will be taken by love and kindness, not by blood and death.'

Rhunelda's very frame seemed to shake with fury.

'Base coward !' she exclaimed, springing forward, 'if thou wilt not take revenge when it is in thy power, I will satisfy mine.'

And drawing the dagger she wore, she rushed madly upon him. What Eric had told her would be the case under similar circumstances happened ; for though taken unawares, he nevertheless in a moment had

wrenched the dagger from her grasp, and securing both her hands, drew her forcibly down beside him on one of the stones at the foot of the cairn, where she sat scarlet with shame at being defeated.

‘Rhunelda!’ said Eric, in a quiet pitying tone, ‘thou art beside thyself; thou knowest not what thou art doing.’

‘Kill me, if thou wilt,’ said Rhunelda haughtily, ‘but I will have none of thy preachings.’

‘Thou art my prisoner,’ said the clear firm voice, ‘and must submit to what I will.’

She felt that what he said was only too true; she could not unclasp his hands, which lightly, though strong as iron, encircled her wrists; and grinding her teeth with rage, she was obliged to acknowledge to herself that she was indeed a captive.

Eric resumed :

‘If ever, Rhunelda, thou shouldest want a friend or a protector—and thou mayest well need both before very long—send to me, and I will come to thee. I will forget thine anger to-day, and will but remember that thou wast my playfellow in times long gone by. Farewell! we must part for a time! May God in His great mercy change thine heart!’

He released her hands; she sprang up, and flew away down the hill without even waiting to pick up her dagger. Eric remained seated until the sound of her light footstep had died away in the distance; then he rose, muttering half aloud :

‘I have provoked an implacable foe; I must away, and attend to my own safety.’

But before he went, he raised Rhunelda’s dagger,

looked at it for a moment, and then placed it within the breast of his cloak.

He plunged into the forest, and by various short cuts and turns, which he seemed to remember perfectly, speedily found his way to the hut of John, the Christian captive we spoke of in an earlier chapter. Eric knocked once, twice, without receiving any answer; but at the third time he was bidden to enter.

The little hut was scarcely changed since his last visit there, now so many years ago; but the owner was lying stretched on his bed of deerskin; a pinewood torch stuck in a hole in the wall above his head, while his precious parchment lay before him. He was not reading, he had become too nearly blind for that. He raised his head with something of a start as the young man entered, and said:

‘Do ye come here to take my life? there is little else here for ye.’

‘Father, dost thou not know me?’ said the intruder, coming and kneeling down beside him: ‘I am thine own pupil Eric.’

‘Now Heaven be praised!’ cried John fervently, while tears of eager excitement and surprise rolled down his cheeks, ‘for having thus once again, before I die, allowed my old eyes to rest upon thee. Thou hast been living with thine uncle all this time? for thither Oscar told me he had sent thee?’

‘Yes,’ said Eric, ‘and I have but lately heard the full story of my birth. But, knowest thou not that Oscar is dead?’

‘May God have mercy upon his soul!’ said John solemnly.

'I came here to be present at his burial,' continued Eric; 'Rhunelda is leader now, and she is, alas! mad in her desire for vengeance for her father's death.'

'Those sound not like the words of a worshipper of Odin and Thor?' said John wistfully.

'I am a Christian!' said Eric quickly.

'Thanks be to God!' cried John, clasping his hands, as if by that to still the beating of his heart; 'but tell me how!'

'My uncle had an old Christian slave,' replied Eric, 'though himself knew not of it. I discovered it accidentally; and I obtained from him a continuation of those teachings I had already had from thee. A few days before his death, he baptized me, and I am determined, as far in me lies, to live according to my profession.'

John did not answer; there was an expression of deep joy and thankfulness upon his face. After a short pause Eric resumed:

'I have lately learnt that most probably my grandfather, my mother's father, is yet alive; I am resolved either to learn the certainty of his death, or, if alive, to find him. I wished first to see Rhunelda; I have done so, and I have made her my mortal foe. I must fly as soon as morning dawns. But, father, thou wilt watch over Rhunelda, and if thou seest that her passions are bringing her into danger, thou wilt let me know.'

'I? alas, my son,' replied John, 'I cannot leave my bed, and it is long since Rhunelda came to see me. But should occasion offer, I will do my best for her. Hast forgotten all thy reading, Eric?'

'I fear me, nearly so,' replied Eric; 'shall I try?' John handed him the parchment, and then in that lowly hut was seen a strange sight; the wild young warrior with his haughty brow bending meekly over the crabbed and crooked letters, while he slowly and laboriously spelt out the precious words. So intent was he upon his task that he never looked at John, until the first rays of the sun piercing through the cranks and crevices of the frail wall, warned him that it was time he started; but when he glanced towards his companion, he was struck by the perfect stony white of his face. He stepped up to the bedside, and laid his hand upon him—then he uttered a slight groan;—his aged master was dead!

CHAPTER V.

'Twas then, in hour of utmost need,
He proved his courage, breath, and speed;
Now slow he stalked, with stealthy pace,
Now started forth in rapid race;
Oft doubling back, in mazy train,
To blind the trace the dews retain;
Now climb the rocks, projecting high,
To baffle the pursuer's eye;
Now sought the stream, whose brawling sound,
The echo of his footsteps drowned.

* * * *

If deeper down the copse he drew,
He heard the rangers' loud halloo,
Beating each cover while they came,
As if to start the woodland game.'

SIR W. SCOTT—*Rokeby*.

IT was scarcely six o'clock in the morning; but the sun was already high. The alders round the pond near to

John's hut were in full leaf, and though to those living there it seemed but as yesterday since everything was held by the icy hand of winter, already some of the earlier flowers were showing their seeds, and the cranberries were forming. The delicate bog-gale scented the air, and the bedstraws spread their tiny, star-like flowers.

In the centre of the clump of alders, where the boughs were thickest, stood Eric, beside a deep trench that he had apparently just finished digging, for he was leaning upon a rude wooden instrument that served him for a spade. It had been a work of no small labour to dig out the ground, which, in the shade, had scarcely yet thoroughly recovered from its wintry freezing, and Eric was hot and flushed. He now gathered small branches of heather, which he threw into the grave mingling them with the wild gale. Every minute was precious, and this delay might perhaps cost him his own life; but he reckoned no toil or risk too great if he could render his master's last resting-place more secure.

Having thus lined the grave, he made his way to the hut, whence he presently returned, bearing the body, carefully wrapped in a cloak and in the deerskin that had served him as a bed. He reverently laid it in the grave, threw in, according to the custom of the country, more branches of heather and bracken, then filled it up with soil, and, with considerable difficulty, gathering together some stones, he heaped them upon the mound to protect it from the wolves.

He was about to move away, when an idea seemed suddenly to strike him. He recollects that when the aged Christian servant of his uncle was dying, he had

begged him when he buried him to put up a cross over his grave. John certainly must not be without this addition, which Eric regarded somewhat in the light of a charm ; and not having altogether emancipated himself from the terrors of Odin, he thought it might be something to keep the offended warrior-god from the grave of his old contemner. He hastily cut two little branches of alder, which he peeled, and tying them in the form of a cross, placed them at the head of the grave.

He had now done all that he could, and must think of his own safety. He went back to the hut, took up the parchment, opened the chest before-mentioned as standing at the end of the hut, and took from it the tiny flask in which John kept his healing essence, put both within the breast of his cloak, carefully secured the door, and then was standing in front of the clump of alders, thinking how thick they grew, and congratulating himself that the boughs hung so close, no one would guess there had been a late intrusion into the bushes, when suddenly he saw a shadow in the pool at his feet ; he turned, and perceived the figure of a man rapidly approaching him through the pine-trees.

It was a Northman of the most savage and wild type ; his feet and ankles were bare, the deerskin that was thrown around him looked as if it had been torn straight from the carcass, and there was no appearance of the rude attempt at tanning that was usually employed before the skin was worn.

His red hair hung in shaggy locks over his shoulders, and fell low on his forehead, weather-beaten and scarred

with wounds. His expression was sullen and ferocious ; in his hand he carried a long axe. He was moving forward with precaution, as if unwilling to be seen, while his bare feet made scarcely any sound upon the earth.

Although Eric was quite prepared to see a foe in every one that approached him, he nevertheless had no wish or intention to provoke a quarrel ; so he only drew his dagger, to show the fellow that he could and would defend himself should necessity arise, and then remained as before, gazing into the pool. The other continued his slow and somewhat stealthy approach, until he was within a few yards of the young man, when Eric, feeling that he could not with safety allow him to approach nearer, until he was certain he were friend or foe, looked round quietly, giving the customary salutation, saying :

‘ Good-morrow, friend ; thou art abroad early.’

‘ Not too early for the business I have in hand,’ said the other. ‘ And who mayest thou be, wandering about thus ?’

‘ A stranger,’ replied Eric, ‘ merely passing through the country.’

‘ Hast breakfasted ?’ demanded the other.

‘ No,’ rejoined the young man, laughing ; ‘ nor am I like to get anything more for either breakfast or supper than I can find or kill in the forest.’

‘ That were a pity,’ said the man. ‘ But if wilt come with me, I will mend thy breakfast fare. The sun is high, and I at least have a hunter’s appetite.’

The offer and words were frank and fair enough, but there was something in the fellow’s manner that repulsed rather than attracted ; his voice was hoarse, resembling the growl of a sullen bear. While he was

speaking he kept shifting from one foot to the other, with a kind of awkward nervousness (if such a thing existed in those days), and, above all, he never looked Eric straight in the face. These signs would have been sufficient to put a man upon his guard in a country where every man you met might be your mortal enemy, even had there not been, as in Eric's case, particular reasons for fearing a hostile attack ; but he was young, not willing to suspect everybody wishing to do him hurt, perfectly fearless, and, besides, very hungry, and would have run even greater risks than appeared at first sight to threaten him from this man for the sake of a breakfast ; so, albeit not relinquishing his hold upon his weapon, he accepted the proffered refreshment, asking in what direction the hunter's dwelling lay.

'This way,' replied the other, pointing deeper into the forest.

They walked for some time in silence, each taking a mental survey of the other, whereby their mutual respect was increased ; for if Eric could not help admiring the appearance of strength and courage that lay on the guide's savage features, the man on his part glanced with something like envy at the youth's well-built frame, his elastic, firm step, and his bold, free expression. If either entertained a hostile feeling for the other, his regard for his enemy's personal appearance prevented him from showing it.

Suddenly the guide spoke.

'What art thou doing in this neighbourhood, friend ? It is rare for strangers to come here.'

'I am travelling through the country,' said Eric.
'May I ask who is the head jarl here ?'

'Dost not know the name of Oscar, the sea-king ?'

'His name—yes. Does he rule you ?'

'Hast not heard of his death ?' said the man incredulously.

'I am a stranger here,' said Eric firmly.

The man looked at him for a moment suspiciously ; but Eric met his glance undauntedly, and the fellow felt that, as far as looks went, his companion had spoken truth—those sparkling, dark eyes, that crisp, dark hair, did not belong to a son of the Vikings.

There was a momentary silence ; then Eric, who wished to maintain as long as possible the amiable relations between himself and his entertainer, said :

'So the jarl is dead. Who rules in his stead—his son ?'

'No,' replied the other ; 'his daughter, Rhunelda.'

'Pardon me, friend,' said Eric ; 'I know not the customs of these parts, but surely it is strange for the sons of the North to be led by a woman ?'

'Very, indeed,' replied the other ; 'but we love and obey Rhunelda.'

'She must be very beautiful,' said Eric, 'thus to have charmed you.'

'She *is*,' replied the man ; then, conscious that he had committed himself, he added hastily, 'that is, as far as I, a poor cnicht, can tell.'

If Eric had been disposed to put any confidence in the man before, that confidence was now wholly destroyed. The fellow's manner had hitherto been that of an inferior ; he had now betrayed that he was accustomed to be about the person of Rhunelda. Eric

drew to the farther side of the path, and they pursued their way in silence.

Suddenly the guide uttered a sharp cry :

‘ Oh ! oh !’

‘ What is the matter ?’ said Eric, turning.

‘ I have run a thorn into my foot,’ replied the other, staggering against a tree, and pointing to his foot, from which the blood was fast flowing. ‘ I must get it out. Oh ! oh !’

‘ Can I help thee ?’ said Eric, touched by the appearance of suffering.

‘ No,’ replied the other. ‘ Go on ; I will overtake thee. Turn by that large tree there to the left ; thou wilt see my hut right before thee. My wife is there. Oh ! oh !’

Eric moved on a few paces. Suddenly a suspicion flashed through his mind. The fellow’s complaints had been strangely excessive, where his countrymen walked for miles with their naked feet, and where the bearing of pain was considered one of the means of attaining to glory. Had these cries been feigned, to throw him off his guard ? All these thoughts passed through Eric’s mind in far less space of time than it takes us to write them. He looked hastily round, and well was it that he did so ; for at that moment his enemy was stealing upon him, with the intention of cutting him down from behind. When he saw that his purpose was discovered, he aimed a blow at the young man, exclaiming :

‘ Die ! despiser of Rhunelda !’

‘ Ha ! thou knowest me, then ?’ said Eric, and with desperate courage he threw himself upon his adversary, just as another blow was struck at him with the fatal

axe ; happily it lighted upon his shoulder, instead of his head, and before his adversary could recover his weapon, Eric had wrenched it from him, thrown it to the ground, and closed with him.

There was a fearful struggle of a few moments ; what Eric wanted in brute strength, he made up for in lightness and agility. But the blood was flowing fast from the gash in his shoulder ; it seemed as if he must be overpowered. Suddenly drawing a dagger from his belt, the man, uttering a loud and piercing whoop, struck full at Eric's throat ; but at that instant Eric's long knife was sheathed in his breast—and he fell.

There was no time to lose ; already Eric heard the distant shouts of the coming help to his foe. He pushed the still breathing body as far under the bracken as was possible at the moment, caught up the axe for defence, and set off running at full speed in the opposite direction to that in which his treacherous guide had been leading him.

He had been running thus for a good five minutes, when discordant cries announced that the avengers had reached the scene of action. There was a momentary pause ; they were thrown out by discovering no one. Then a louder yell declared that they had found their companion's body, and they rushed forth in the pursuit.

Eric flew on, regardless of obstacles, scarcely touching the ground with his feet ; while, however, his flushed brow and panting breath showed that the strain was beginning to tell upon him. He still maintained his start, though the shouts of his pursuers echoed far and wide through the forest. Suddenly he was stopped by

finding himself on the banks of the river ! There was no time for consideration. He plunged into the water. It was icy-cold, and the stream ran fast. The swimmer boldly headed the tide ; he was growing exhausted. A little in front of him there rose a tiny isle, just level with the water's brink, on which grew one large alder bush. If he could reach this, he was comparatively safe. He made a spasmodic effort, touched the shore, dragged himself up by the branches, scrambled, scarce knowing what he did, to the heart of the islet, where he sank down exhausted. At the same moment the headmost of his pursuers reached the shore of the river, having tracked their prey thus far by the blood that flowed from his wound.

They uttered a yell of disappointed rage on discovering nothing, paused a moment in consultation, then, separating into two bands, went, one up the river-bank one way, the second the other direction, while two or three remained beating the bushes round the spot where he had struck the river. That he should have committed himself to the rapid, icy current, seemed little better than madness ; besides, the opposite shores rose in precipitous rocks, extending more than half a mile in either direction, precluding the possibility of any one landing there ; and that Eric could have found shelter on one of the islets, of which there was a group of five or six midway in the stream, happily not occurring to them, Eric was for the moment saved, though how long he might be kept a prisoner on the island, or whether his strength would hold out for him to swim to shore again, was a matter of doubt and anxiety.

every motion torture. He endeavoured to walk, but could do no more than crawl. Blank despair stared him in the face ; he could neither fight nor flee. A prisoner on this island, he must starve to death !

For one moment he stood irresolute ; then, with the stern determination of his race, he went steadily forward to the edge of the water, and, carefully peeping out, surveyed the shore opposite. There was no living thing to be seen as far as eye could reach in any direction ; his enemies must either have given up the pursuit in despair, or else, by the very ardour of the chase, been led far away.

Eric took off his woollen garment, and then plunged into the stream, in the hope by this rough treatment to cure his stiffness ; but the remedy had well-nigh proved more fatal than the disease. At the first flow of the cold water around him, he lost all breath, and was obliged to catch at the over-hanging branches of the trees to drag himself up again to recover a little. The second and third trials were no more successful ; and he was obliged to recognise, with a groan, that, for the present, at least, it was utterly impossible for him to swim.

He resumed his woollen garment and his fur cloak, which was now quite dry, and began striding vigorously up and down the tiny beach ; and this time with more effect, for though, to begin with, every step was agony, yet by degrees his limbs relaxed, and at the end of half an hour he could walk with some tolerable amount of comfort. His hunger, which had been for a while kept in abeyance by his sleep, began to make itself peremptorily felt.

He drew from a pouch inside his cloak a small packet of dried deer-flesh and rye-bread, which he had brought with him for his supper the preceding evening, but which the various emotions attendant on the occurrences of last night had made him forget.

This small store he divided into two equal portions, one of which he then ate, reserving the other for future needs. He quenched his thirst at the streamlet before named ; and as it would not be safe to venture on shore while the sun was yet so high, he looked round for some place where he might repose his wearied limbs with less risk than on the damp earth.

In addition to the friendly alder bushes, the island contained one pollard willow, and into this Eric climbed. It was an uneasy seat, but he was alike raised above the marshy earth, and hidden from observation by the tangled branches of the alder behind him, against which, frail support though it was, he leant. The sun cast his genial, warming beams upon him ; Eric grew gradually soothed, and all violent pain now having ceased, his eyes closed again from very weariness, and he was once more asleep.

He was awakened by a chill feeling in the air—the sun had disappeared, it was towards evening. He descended from his tree, and once again carefully and closely regarded the opposite bank : all was still and solitary. He took off his fur cloak, which he fastened upon his head, with the intention of, if possible, keeping it dry ; then, with a short prayer to his master's God to preserve him from a watery grave, he committed himself to the stream.

It was a weird and solemn scene. Though the sun

had disappeared behind the barrier of rock upon the northern side of the river, and was approaching the western horizon, it was still some time before sunset. The reflection of every rock and jagged peak was clear and sharp in the transparent mirror; everything was intensely still; not a sound of living thing; nothing but the lap, lap of the swiftly-flowing stream, as it swept on its way to the ocean, gurgling between the delicate green branches of the trailing water-shrubs along its banks.

The sky spread overhead, an immense azure dome only tinged with a rosy hue above the rocky hills, behind which the sun had disappeared. It was a scene that would have impressed with awe even a thoroughly educated man; was it strange that Eric, scarcely freed from the superstitions in which he had been brought up, should feel a strange terror creeping over him, as he slowly and painfully ploughed his way through the deep, for the arm that had been wounded hung stiff and helpless by his side, and he was swimming with one hand alone? Was it strange that thoughts should sweep over him, reminding him of the tales he had heard and so long believed?—that Odin and all the northern divinities, in which he had not yet lost all faith, should rise up before him, making him dread their vengeance. He had forsaken them, derided them; might they not well appear, and overwhelm and crush him? Might not already out of the glorious west be starting the winged bolt that would strike him dead? A prayer to Odin for safety and protection rose to his lips, and, almost despairing, he let himself drift for a few moments, and floated idly upon the surface of the stream. But

the current was ever remorselessly bearing him onward, downward. He again resumed the posture of swimming. At this moment an elk—so still was the scene—came down to drink at the water's edge, at a spot where the bushes were a trifle less thick and made an opening into the forest.

The reader, now perhaps sitting quietly by his fire-side, can scarcely imagine the effect that this had upon Eric—the only living thing beside himself in this solitude. It seemed to encourage and strengthen him, and reprove his want of faith in the Unseen God, who surely, since He thus cared for the beasts of the forest, would have some thought for the lonely wanderer.

Eric was now so near the shore, that he could distinctly see every movement of the beautiful creature, every turn of its large, liquid eye. Eric was a keen hunter, and at that moment food would have been inexpressibly precious to him; but so much was he struck by the whole picture of the deer and its surroundings, that he did not regret the not having with him the instruments of death to secure the prey for his own. He remained stationary, watching it with an almost affectionate interest.

Suddenly the animal raised its head, and caught sight of this intruder upon its solitude; it gazed for a second at him, startled, then bounded away into the depths of the forest. But the weird spell was broken. Eric made a few vigorous strokes, which brought him to the shore, landed, shook himself like a great dog, paused for a moment to regain his breath, and then walked rapidly forward along the edge of the river.

He knew where he was now, and that, if he only

went far enough, he should reach a small fishing village on the outskirts of Oscar's domains, which, being so remote, was quite as ready to render aid to their other neighbour, Eric's uncle, as to Oscar. Much more, then, when they had nothing more to fear from the grim sea-king, were they likely to endeavour to ingratiate themselves with one from whom they might with more probability expect reward or punishment, than from a helpless girl just entering upon her rule, with a mortal feud on her hands. Besides which, Eric had a claim upon one man, whose life he had once saved; so that, if even the whole village should turn against him, Wolfgang could not in honour desert his benefactor at this hour of extreme peril.

But though Eric thus saw a chance of ultimate safety and repose, he was still several miles from the desired haven, and his dangers were by no means over; for might not a foe be lurking behind every bush? Might he not at any moment meet some of the returning pursuers? And then what was likely to happen to him, spent and exhausted as he felt himself to be, totally unfit for a hard fight?

But happily, at this his need, the elastic spirits of youth did not forsake him; he had escaped so far, and that was always something. He walked steadily on, keeping a sharp look-out on every bush and angle where a foe might be hidden. The thoughts that crowded upon his brain were none of the most enlivening kind. He was most loth to ascribe the attempt to take his life to Rhunelda's vindictive treachery; yet how otherwise to explain the conduct of his self-offered guide? so unlike the usual behaviour of his countrymen, who, though

most ready to stab or to strike in any brawl into which their hot tempers might precipitate them, yet scorned to take unfair advantage of a foe ; to profess friendliness to him, and then to catch him at an unguarded moment. Eric pondered and pondered : he *would* not blame Rhunelda ; he *would* not believe that she had given the order for basely attacking him. No ! doubtless on first entering she had given way to a very natural burst of anger against her old playfellow ; some one had heard her, and without waiting to ask had gone forth with the intention of taking the defenceless stranger's life, hoping thus to win his mistress's approving smiles, in which, had he lived to return, he would have found himself grievously disappointed ; but how then to account for the band of pursuers which had evidently lain hidden, ready to rush upon their victim ? and had not the guide been pushed on by the desire of obtaining glory by personally ridding their chieftainess of her enemy, it had gone hard with Eric. He put aside the thought with an impatient stamp of his foot, and the exclamation, 'She could not have done it !' and then set himself to the more practical business of reaching his proposed place of shelter before the night should close in.

The sun was now setting ; the western sky was purple and gold, and the edges of the clouds as they were reflected in the water bore a brighter tinge.

Suddenly, Eric thought he heard the sound of a voice calling through the wood. He stopped, listened ; he heard it again coming nearer ! Self-preservation bade him seek a refuge among the tall reeds that covered the bank ; his high courage and impetuosity scorned con-

cealment, even though the price should be overwhelming numbers. He glanced at his wounded arm; it hung helpless by his side! Again the cry sounded nearer: his resolution was taken; he stepped among the reeds, leaning his back against a willow-tree, ready for defence; he would fly no further.

Scarcely had he accomplished this, when across one of the open spaces in the forest, where he had a full view for some little distance inland, sprang a band of five or six men, all tall and well made, and attired in cloaks of some kind of black fur. They all bore long axes in the one hand, and round shields in the other.

Eric had no difficulty in recognising them as members of Oscar's own especial bodyguard. They moved forward with rapid though steady steps; they were not seeking any one, that was certain, and Eric breathed more freely. A few paces behind them came Rhunelda herself, with a slower, more wearied step; her cheeks were bright with exercise and excitement, and her eyes sparkling, but her look was unrested and feverish, and ever and anon she cast an eager, almost startled, look around, as if she feared to see some spectre rise from the bushes; but it would have required a sharper eye than that of her rough attendants to note these slight symptoms. Her general aspect was bold and free; well calculated to strengthen the favourable impression made in the first instance by her extreme beauty upon a rudely poetic people. She had evidently been out hunting, for she bore bow and arrows, and immediately behind her came three or four attendants of a lower class carrying a magnificent deer.

If Eric had before cherished any unkind or suspicious feeling against Rhunelda, all vanished at the sight of her; and he could hardly restrain himself from springing to her side, from the mere desire of being near something he had known and loved. But the sylvan train passed on; the sound of their voices and steps died away in the distance, and all was once again silent and solitary; and Eric pursued his way, wondering what could have brought Rhunelda and her bodyguard out hunting at a time when it might have been supposed that every one would have been occupied in preparing for an immediate march against the enemy.

Eric slowly and wearily plodded on; the shadows lengthened and deepened, it was not darkness, but rather a subdued twilight in this far northern summer. At last he saw, a little way before him, a small number of huts, clustered close under the shelter of an overhanging rock; he turned aside to the left, wending his way with difficulty between the reeds and rushes, frequently splashing into a pool, which he had missed in the uncertain light; then he came upon a tiny brooklet, finding its way down to the mighty river, and it foamed and gurgled, swollen by the melting of the snows.

Following the course of this stream, he reached a little hut, built entirely of reeds plaited in and out among their brethren still left standing; thus perched like the nest of some water-bird, waving up and down with every movement of the water, it had yet stood on firmly year after year, affording the only shelter thought necessary by its hardy inmates: often when the floods were high they were unable for several days together to leave their watery abode.

At the door of this house Eric knocked; in a minute or so it was opened, and the stalwart figure of a man, with shaggy locks indeed, but with an open and frank expression, presented itself before the eyes of the young wanderer.

'What is wanted at this hour?' asked the man gruffly but not unkindly.

'A night's shelter, good Wolfgang, for I am wounded and sore spent.'

'Who is it that speaks?' said Wolfgang, endeavouring to scan his visitor's features in the uncertain light.

'I, Eric,' replied the young man.

'Then I will have nought to do with thee,' said Wolfgang. 'Rhunelda herself and her jarls have been here this day, ordering that if thou shalt appear or present thyself to any one, thou be at once put to death. They say thou hast insulted Rhunelda, and had part in Oscar's death.'

'That is a foul lie, by whosoever invented,' cried Eric indignantly. 'Dost thou believe, Wolfgang, that I would slay Oscar, my old friend, and benefactor? or that I would insult Rhunelda, my playfellow?'

'I believe it not, I believe it not,' said Wolfgang soothingly; 'thou art a likely lad, but I know nought. For the sake of old friendship and kindness, I will say nothing about thee being here; so get thee away and hide thee in the marsh, for more for thee I will not do.'

'I can go no farther,' said Eric dejectedly, leaning against the wall of the hut. 'Far better kill me at once; I would rather die by the hand of an honest fellow like thee, and will hold it good requital for what I once did for thee, if thou wilt strike me dead upon the spot.'

Thou mightest get a reward by carrying my head to Rhunelda,' he added bitterly; concluding, however, with a mournful, 'Since she wishes me dead, what avails it to live ?'

This appeal evidently touched Wolfgang's rough heart.

'Come, come,' he said, 'if thou wilt not say to any here who thou art, and wilt keep secret where thou hast lodged, I will give thee bed and supper. I rather would believe thee than that dark-browed fellow they call "Rhunelda's counsellor;" the gods forbid that she should give him for a head to her people. Come in !'

So saying, he pulled Eric into the hut, and carefully shut the door, at the same time calling lustily : 'Wife ! wife ! Ultha.'

'Here, husband !' responded a clear voice, and a woman of about thirty issued from the inner apartment. She was short, but with a nice figure ; she had the fair hair, light-coloured eyes, and beautiful complexion of her countrywomen. Her dress consisted of a short woolen petticoat, and a jacket of deerskin, ornamented with silver ; for Wolfgang was a man of considerable importance and standing in his village.

'Here, wife,' said Wolfgang, presenting Eric to her, 'is a young jarl, who has come to seek a night's lodging; he has been gored by a stag, and hurt in the shoulder ; canst do anything for him ?'

'That I can,' replied Ultha cheerily, 'poor lad ! he looks dead beat,' as Eric sunk exhausted upon a wooden stool.

Wolfgang then removed his visitor's upper garment,

and Ultha proceeded to examine the wound; but on seeing the gash she speedily exclaimed: ‘This is no wound caused by a stag’s horn! look, it is clear and sharp, and must have been done with an axe, or some other edged weapon.’

‘Hold thy prattle, woman,’ said Wolfgang anxiously, ‘and attend to the hurt; trouble not thyself as to how it was done.’

Ultha gave her husband a very merry look as she rejoined:

‘I think not the worse of thy friend that he has fought well in a fair quarrel. But I must get something to bathe the cut.’

Thereupon she half filled an earthen bowl with water, and threw into it a bunch of herbs that she carefully selected from among a number hanging along the wall; set the vessel upon the fire, which she replenished with a pine log, and kneeling before it she began to stir the mixture, while she sang in a wild but not otherwise than sweet voice, a charm, of which the following is a rude attempt at translation:

‘CHARM.

‘Branch of broom and flowers of gale,
Ye can soothe the warrior’s pain,
Calm the mourner’s troubled wail,
Heal the dangerous biting wound.

‘Mighty Odin, give an ear;
Listen, gentle Zernebock!
Thou, the valiant, hear, oh, hear,
Listen to thy votary’s prayer.

'Stanch the flowing stream of blood,
Charm away the weary pain,
Cool the feverish heated mood,
That he soon may fight again.'

'Fight, till stiff and stark he's borne
To his honour'd grave ;
And the arms that he hath won
Lay beside him in the cave.
But his soul shall flee away
To the realms of endless day.'

While Ultha thus sang she stirred and beat her mixture, and Eric, soothed by the monotonous sounds, leant his head against the wall, feeling that he would not much care even though he were in the last condition described in the lay; but Ultha had made her brew; she came and began to bathe the wounded shoulder. The first moment the liquid touched it, the pain was so intense, so sudden, that Eric started, and bit his lip to prevent calling out.

'It works,' said Ultha, well contented.

However, as the bathing proceeded, and the clotted blood was washed away, the patient began to feel benefit from the treatment, and Ultha, without stopping her occupation, desired her husband to get the young stranger some supper. Wolfgang complied; lifting up from before the fire the piece of fish that was broiling for their own supper; this he set before his guest, begging him to eat; but Eric was too worn out to be hungry, he wished for nothing but quiet, and Wolfgang stood by quite helpless, looking at the slightly-built frame that he nevertheless knew to be capable of both

feats of strength and patient endurance. But Ultha, with a woman's ready wit, was far from being disengaged by this appearance of failure.

'The lad is tired out,' she said; 'prepare him a bed, and leave the mess beside him; he will eat sure enough when he is a little rested.'

Wolfgang, but too thankful to take the hint, went to the corner of the room, where he shook down a quantity of dried rushes, over which he spread a deerskin. Ultha having completed her dressing of the wound, endeavoured to persuade her patient to take something. Eric was now so far rested that the prospect of food was no longer so utterly distasteful to him; he, however, ate but little, and very soon gladly responded to his host's invitation to lay himself to rest. Soothed by the fragrant scent of the rushes, and the lapping of the water round the place of his shelter, he was soon asleep. But the first part of the night his dreams were haunted all by the various and exciting events of the day; and ever Rhunelda was the central figure; now foremost in the pursuit, now ready to strike him down. Then he was flying, closely pursued by the figure with streaming golden hair and brandished dagger. Before him lay a haven of shelter; could he reach it? He strained every nerve; his wound was burning and throbbing; his feet seemed to refuse to move. His pursuer came on lightly, as if she had wings. Now they were in a bog; and Eric struggled painfully forward with tightened breath, while the phantom skipped from tussock to tussock, scarcely soiling its foot on the black and marshy earth. Suddenly Eric slipped and fell; with a scream of triumph his enemy sprang upon him; already

he felt the cold dagger at his throat—when lo ! the uplifted hand was caught, and Eric saw, standing clear before him in the hot air, for it was noonday, the form of his aged master. ‘ Peace !’ he said, and laid his hand on Eric’s brow, and at the word, the fiend melted into air, and Eric awoke with the perspiration streaming from his face.

He raised himself upon his elbow ; all was still ; he heard no sound but the twitter of some early birds. He laid him down again, and once more sleep visited him ; and this time, calm and refreshing, undisturbed by dreams of any sort.

CHAPTER VII.

‘ You say he is my enemy ?
That I ought to strike him down ?
I tell you he hath eaten of my bread !
What ! he slew my brother, say you ?
Away with these thoughts ! fill me not with suspicion ;
He is my guest.’

IT was morning ; the sun sent his rays slanting between the branches of the trees, and the long green boughs waved and dipped themselves in the cool dark water ; the reeds rustled beneath the summer breeze as if each were whispering its tale of gladness, its experiences of life, to its nearest neighbour. Wolfgang stood at the door of his hut, looking with deep joy at the fair scene spread out before him. His was the happiness of one who is in full health and spirits, who finds pleasure in the mere fact of being, of existing ; and as he watched

the dancing waves they offered to him no thought, no simile of time ever flowing onwards; the only thing that they suggested to him was a feeling of regret that he had it not in his power to catch the fish which he saw springing after their prey, and covering the surface of the water with large bright rings. Presently he saw a figure making its way slowly to him through the reeds, and as it came nearer, he perceived that it was a tall-athletic man carrying bow and arrows, while over his shoulder were slung half-a-dozen wild duck. As soon as he was near enough, he greeted Wolfgang:

‘Good-morrow, friend; it is a fine morning.’

‘Very, indeed,’ replied Wolfgang; ‘art having good sport? I see thou hast already killed some birds; a whole string of them swam up the river scarce a quarter of an hour since; thou wilt probably meet with them near the reedy clump a mile farther on.’

‘Eh, but, friend,’ rejoined the fowler, ‘it is scant kindness of thee to send one on one’s way without so much as offering one to breakfast.’

‘Wilt breakfast with me?’ said Wolfgang, ill-concealing his anxiety and disquietude at this proposal; ‘thou art welcome. Wife, bring forth the pottage; we will take it in the open air. Sit thee, friend.’

The fowler accordingly threw aside his prey, and seated himself on the trunk of a tree that served as a bench, while Ultha brought the wooden bowls of pottage prepared for breakfast.

Presently, the first keen pangs of hunger being satisfied, Wolfgang asked his guest what news there was in the country?

‘But little,’ replied the fowler; ‘though all men are

amazed at the escape of that young Eric ; if poor Gung had been but a trifle less hasty, he had not escaped, as it is a mystery and a marvel. He must have been sore wounded, for they tracked him far by the blood which flowed from it, even to the water's edge ; but there he disappeared, and what became of him no one knows. They beat the bushes on every side, to no purpose, and the general supposition is that he must have plunged into the water and been drowned. Men do say, however, that Wolfgang the fisher will know more about it than any man.'

'Do they ?' said Wolfgang indifferently, supping his porridge.

'They say,' continued the fowler, 'that he is more like to come to thee than any one, thou owing him a good turn. But if he did really appear, thou wouldest no doubt strike him dead, or take him prisoner ?'

'No I should *not* !' said Wolfgang.

'*Not* !' repeated the fowler in amazement. 'Art thou turning traitor ?'

'Listen to me,' said Wolfgang tranquilly ; 'I obeyed the old leader, for he was strong and brave, and led us well ; but who ever heard of the sons of the North following a woman ?'

'Then thou meanest to set up for thyself ?'

'I said not that,' answered Wolfgang. 'Were I called upon to fight for her, or for home, no one should find Wolfgang slack ; but, when she wishes to slay helpless travellers, she must choose some one else to do the work.'

'But he insulted her, and slew her father,' persisted the other.

'I doubt it very much,' said Wolfgang. 'I know the lad to be strong and brave; I know he loved Oscar like a father, and I will not change my opinion of him because of a foolish woman's whim.'

'It is good for thee,' said the fowler, looking fearfully round, 'that none of Rhunelda's house-jarls hear thee; they would soon revenge the injury done to their mistress by thy words.'

'They would bide buffet from a true man's hand first,' said Wolfgang; 'not that I wish any ill to the young Rhunelda—may the gods be with her, for she has a hard task before her; and when she needs real service, may she find none more backward than Wolfgang.'

There was a pause; then the fowler said:

'I wonder if thou knowest where this young Eric is hidden, neighbour?'

'I wonder at thee,' said Wolfgang, 'asking such a question, for thou runnest the risk of sharing the guilt of knowing where he is, without my excuse that he once did me a great service; and further, I believe that if I knew where he was hidden, and guessed that thou knewest it, and that thou wast ready to betray him, I would not suffer thee to leave this place alive.'

The fowler looked sharply and suspiciously at Wolfgang, but he could see nothing; the fisherman was quietly spooning down his pottage as if he had no other thought beyond that of enjoying his breakfast and sunning his large limbs in the genial warmth of the sun.

Clearly, there was nothing to be had from Wolfgang; so the meal being concluded, they parted, to all appearance amicably; Wolfgang wishing his guest a good

day's sport, and the fowler, as he plodded away through the marsh, bidding his host a fair Morrow. When, however, he was lost to sight among the tangled weeds and bushes, Wolfgang turned, and with an expression of deep anxiety re-entered his hut. He knew his late visitor to be the trusty friend of one of Rhunelda's house-jarls; he had little doubt but that the man had been sent as a spy; and though nothing had been actually said, he felt sure that the fowler suspected how the case stood. Even if it were not so bad as this, if his unwelcome morning guest were not followed by a band of men demanding Eric's life, and perhaps killing Wolfgang himself in the first transport of their rage, still it looked very bad for the fugitive that they suspected that he was not dead, and had an idea in what direction he might have flown. How could he in his weak state bear another long day's flight, and perhaps a mortal combátt?

A cheering sight was awaiting the fisherman inside his hut, for by the hearth sat Eric demolishing a good breakfast. The night's rest had done wonders for him, and he looked a different being to the worn-out wanderer that had arrived the evening before.

'Good-morrow, friend,' he said, rising, and heartily shaking Wolfgang's hand; 'how goes it with thee this morn?'

'Well enough,' answered the fisher; 'and how art thou?'

'Much better, thanks to thy good wife's salve; it has done marvels, I scarce feel the cut to-day.'

'That is well,' rejoined Wolfgang, 'for thou wilt have need of all thy strength.'

He then related his conversation with his friend the fowler. Eric listened, and his brow grew thoughtful, though not over-anxious ; and when Wolfgang had finished, he said :

‘I must then go on my way directly ; and thanks to you, good friends, for your hospitality, without which I should not have been fit to travel, even if I had been alive.’

Wolfgang, like most other simple-minded people, was influenced by those he was with, and seeing Eric so bright and cheery, his own courage began to rise. In anything but a despondent mood he undertook to go and see if there were any foes in sight, and then to accompany Eric for part at least of his day’s journey ; while Ultha prepared a plentiful supply of dried deer’s flesh and rye bread for the traveller’s consumption, to which provision she added a bunch of herbs, an infusion of which, she assured Eric, would, if he repeated the proper charm while dipping the bundle in water, complete the cure of the wound already so happily begun. Eric thanked her, and having learnt the mystic words, promised faithfully to attend to her directions.

‘Farewell, mother,’ he said, ‘and thank thee for thy care.’

‘No need, lad, no need,’ she answered, looking at him with well-deserved admiration as he stood before her, with his bright expression and keen dark eye.

‘And, mother,’ said Eric, lowering his voice, ‘thou wilt let me know if ever Rhunelda should be in danger, or in want of a friend. A “bote” sent to my uncle’s would be sure to reach me.’

'Ay, lad, ay,' said Ultha, looking at him curiously, as if a new light had suddenly entered her mind; 'so that is it!—that is what brought thee here through so many dangers? I will let thee know if ought should happen to her. It would be better for the people maybe if thou wert their leader.'

'Eric, art thou ready?' called Wolfgang's voice from without.

'Yes, coming,' answered Eric.

It was deemed no outrage by Wolfgang or his wife that their handsome young guest paid his thanks for the night's shelter and hospitality by a kiss on Ultha's round plump cheek; then the two men pursued their way in silence for some time, Wolfgang carrying his fishing implements to serve as a pretext for being out, should they meet any curious acquaintance.

They kept close by the margin of the river to avoid notice from any of the inhabitants of the village before-mentioned, Eric moving forward with a light step, whistling gaily, and from time to time plucking a leaf or flower from the shrubs that overhung the path, while his companion walked with a steady, slower stride, as if well aware that he had a long day's journey before him, and wishing to husband his strength.

By about noonday they had reached a grassy space enclosed by bushes on every side except that towards the water. Here they paused to rest during the heat of the day. Stretched on the ground they took their simple mid-day meal, concluding it with some of the wild fruits that grew near at hand.

Wolfgang then threw his net into the water and lay

lazily watching it, while Eric had nearly fallen asleep, when he was roused by Wolfgang saying:

‘Eric, what wert thou doing when Gung met thee yester morn ? Why, when thou knewest that it was not safe for thee to remain, didst thou not fly as soon as the old leader’s funeral was over ?’

‘I went to spend the night with John of the cell,’ replied Eric ; ‘I wished to see him again—it is many years since we parted. Thou rememberest John, Wolfgang ?’

‘Yes,’ said Wolfgang slowly ; ‘an old man with a long white beard, who used to tell charms. I thought he was dead, it is so long since I saw him ; and then he was very old, older than the grandfather of the village.’

‘He *is* dead,’ said Eric sadly ; ‘he died the night I was with him. He was very feeble, and the joy of seeing me was too much for him. I had finished burying him when I was met by this Gung, as thou callest him.’

There was something in the young man’s tone that caused Wolfgang to say :

‘Thou art not sorry that he is dead ? He had the evil eye, and they say it was through him that all the cattle died that we drove off, after the burning of Egersmund, the deekiller’s dwelling.’

‘If,’ said Eric, ‘he had done that, Oscar would not have suffered him to live ; yet thou knowest that Oscar protected him.’

This was conclusive reasoning for Wolfgang, and he was silent for awhile ; then he resumed :

‘But why didst thou visit him, Eric ?—didst foresee

that he would die that night, and so wishedst to bury him ?

' I wanted to see him because he was very kind to me in the days long ago.'

' Ah !' said Wolfgang, and paused again, but in a few minutes began another subject : ' Eric, why did Oscar send thee away ? He loved thee like a son : what didst thou do to offend him ?

Eric bit his lip at the word ' son,' but replied calmly : Because I refused to be devoted to the band of revengers.'

' And why didst thou refuse ? to revenge is a sacred duty imposed upon us in all our service to Odin.'

' But I do not worship or believe in Odin,' said Eric gravely.

Wolfgang looked at him rather as if he thought he was out of his mind.

' Poor lad,' he said ; ' what then dost thou worship ?'

' One God—the Maker and Creator of us all,' replied Eric reverently.

' Thou art dreaming, Eric,' said Wolfgang ; ' the fever of thy wound makes thee wander. Thou canst not mean that in earnest ?'

' But I do !' said Eric ; ' but for that belief I should never have been sent away from Oscar's house ; and instead of at this moment being a houseless fugitive, I should have been, as Rhunelda's husband, your leader.'

Wolfgang started. He remembered tales of the long past, when it was said that the old chief meant to make Eric his heir by wedding him with Rhunelda. A faith, for the sake of which Eric had given up so much, must,

he felt have something in it ; still, it was with an incredulous look that he said :

‘ And dost believe that thy God can do aught for thee, Eric ? ’

‘ I do,’ replied Eric ; ‘ I believe that He is almighty. He comforted my old master through his long and painful exile ; and at last John died in the full assurance that he would live for ever in the presence of his God ; and I believe He will do as much for me if I do my duty, and one of the first things that His religion teaches is to forgive our enemies.’

Eric paused ; he was gazing earnestly at the cliffs opposite to him, which stood out with the bright lights and deep shadows of the noonday sun ; then he carried his looks higher, to the blue vault of heaven. At this moment he had no doubt whatever of the truth of all that he had heard and learnt from the two Christian captives with whom it had been his lot to live.

Wolfgang did not interrupt him. Slowly he landed his net, picking out from it the best and largest fish, and throwing the others back into the water—perhaps he too was meditating on what had just been said.

Presently, the shadows growing longer, they resumed their journey. They pursued their way for some time in silence, then Eric said :

‘ I fear me, Wolfgang, that thou art offended with me ? ’

‘ Offended with thee ? no, lad ! our fathers worshipped Odin and Thor, and all went well with them ; and now thou sayest that these are nought, and that something else must be believed in ; I cannot tell what thou meanest.’

'I cannot explain it to thee, Wolfgang; I do not understand it myself enough for that, and yet I wholly believe it.'

'Well, well, lad,' said Wolfgang, 'I wish thee nought but good; and I hope that thy God, whoever He may be, will be able to protect thee, and there's my hand upon it.'

The conversation was now upon lighter topics : descriptions of deer and wolf-hunts, of warlike expeditions into foreign countries, of which Eric had seen something, though under a much less distinguished banner than that of the celebrated Oscar.

In this way they arrived at a spot where they must cross the river, now comparatively narrow, to reach the hills on the other side leading to the interior. There was neither bridge nor boat, but those who wished to cross at this or any like part were in the habit of making themselves light canoes of the rushes, which grew very plentifully and very large up the bank. When they had finished with these canoes they let them float away down the stream, where they might frequently be met with, many miles from the place where they had been originally used, rotting against a stone which had stopped them in their onward progress to the sea.

Wolfgang now busied himself in this useful work, while he made Eric rest, declaring that his young friend needed all his energies for the farther journey. The business of canoe-making was a simple one: half-a-dozen long reeds were chosen and bent in the form of a hoop; several others were then fastened to them until the framework resembled an egg cut in half; then

the whole was closely woven in and out with smaller reeds and rushes.

It looked a very fragile contrivance for any one to venture his life in, especially with that rapid-running stream ; but the two men entered it without hesitation, and Wolfgang, by means of a paddle formed from a bunch of heather, fastened into a hoop made of a bent reed, ferried them safely and quickly across.

On the farther side they clambered up until they reached the top of the cliff, from which, at the beginning gradually, but afterwards more and more steeply, rose the first range of hills. These Eric must cross to gain the inland. Here they paused to bid one another farewell.

'Many, many thanks for thy kindness, friend,' said Eric, embracing his host warmly.

'Thou art welcome, lad, very welcome,' answered Wolfgang heartily ; 'thou wilt think of Wolfgang the fisher when thou needest a friend ; and Eric, when thou hast made peace with Rhunelda, come and bide with us a while. I should like to hear more of this God of thine ; if to serve Him one has only to be quiet, I should think He would suit old folks, and I shall be getting old soon.'

Eric warmly promised to come and see his benefactor whenever it were possible, and they parted ; Wolfgang pressing upon his young friend all his remaining store of meat and bread, declaring that he would be at home long before supper-time, and that Eric might go far without having an opportunity of replenishing his provisions ; he strode away down the hill, cutting to the right and left with a long stick he was carrying. Eric stood

watching him until he was out of sight, and then turned him to his task of climbing the mountain.

All was very still around ; as he stepped upon the thyme he pressed out the perfume thick and sweet upon the hot air, but there was no sound ; the very bees had gone to rest, for there was not one to be seen hovering upon this their favourite flower. The scene influenced Eric ; he ceased the merry song with which he had begun the ascent, and slowly and painfully toiled on.

At last he gained the summit, and he could not restrain an exclamation of joy at the view spread out before him. On the side ahead of him lay a wide valley, and beyond rose another and higher range of hills, the flanks of which were clothed with pine-forests, while in the valley, sheltered from the piercing wind, grew the oak, the ash, and the birch ; there was no sign of human habitation as far as eye could reach in that direction. On the other hand lay the stream, winding at the beginning like a silver thread, and then widening gradually until it ended in the mighty and rapid river that hurried its waves to the broad ocean. By carrying his eye still farther, Eric thought he could distinguish, like a black speck in the distance, Rhunelda's home ; and as he gazed, he heaved a bitter sigh. Should he ever see her again ? should he ever clasp as his bride that wild haughty girl, for whose sake nevertheless he was ready to die ?

The deepening gloom warned him that it was time to seek some place to sleep. He descended the hill a little way on the other side, and beneath a large stone where he felt certain that it could give no alarm

or rouse distant sentinels, he kindled his fire and cooked his evening meal; then, having replenished the flame in order to scare the wolves, and placed near a sufficient store of dried wood and fern, he wrapped his cloak around him, and lay down to rest.

CHAPTER VIII.

'He was a man of middle age,
In aspect manly, grave, and sage.'

SIR W. SCOTT.

THE night was only half through when Eric was awakened by the sound of approaching footsteps. He started up and listened. Yes, there was no doubt about it; it was the regular tread of several people advancing along the brow of the hill. Cautiously he peeped from behind his stone, and soon convinced himself that though the strangers were possible foes, they did not come from the direction whence he had to fear pursuit; and as they drew nearer he saw that there was little to be dreaded from them, and he remained leaning carelessly against the rock in the attitude of a man who expects a friendly greeting rather than otherwise from those who approach him.

The troop consisted of five men; the three hindermost were walking beside and guiding two small shaggy ponies, while the two in advance were evidently of superior quality.

The one was a man about fifty, with a keen intelligent face, and a dark beard tinged with grey. His companion was a much younger man, with a light im-

patient step, sparkling brown eyes, and fair hair, which however shared to a certain extent in the deep tan that overspread his face and neck. Both wore cloaks of marten fur, and though they carried arms, their aspect was unmistakably that of men of peace.

As soon as they were within speaking distance, the elder of the two foremost travellers called :

‘ Good-even to thee, friend. May benighted wanderers, who have lost their way, ask to share thy fire ? ’

‘ Whence come ye ? ’ asked Eric.

‘ From the north.’

‘ And whither are ye bound ? ’

‘ For the interior.’

Suspicion and inhospitality were no part of the Northman’s character, and Eric responded with alacrity :

‘ Ye may share my fire, and welcome ; make haste, for the night is chilly ; ’ and he threw on to the flame a fresh supply of fuel.

Thus encouraged, the travellers made no delay in coming down the hill to Eric’s sheltered nook, where they speedily unladen their horses, and left them to graze upon the short herbage that covered the hill ; two of the men fetched water from a neighbouring spring, and the whole party clustered round the fire, to enjoy the warmth and their supper. Presently Eric remarked :

‘ Ye say ye are going inland ; then how came ye to be moving in this direction, which leads straight upon the sea ? ’

‘ We had lost our way,’ replied the elder stranger, ‘ and knew not in what direction we were going, until we saw the sea before us, and perceived that we were

journeying right upon the domains of the dread sea-king Oscar, from whom may heaven defend us !

‘ He will never trouble you more !’ said Eric abruptly.

‘ Heaven be praised that he has at last met with his deserved doom !’ exclaimed the younger traveller.

‘ Hold !’ said Eric. ‘ I may not hear ill of Oscar.’

‘ Art a friend or follower of his ?’ asked the elder and calmer traveller.

‘ No,’ answered Eric, ‘ he was mine enemy ; but yet I would not wish him evil.’

‘ Art a native of this country ?’ was the next question, put with some curiosity as they glanced at Eric’s dark hair.

‘ Yes,’ replied the young man, briefly and simply. ‘ But who are ye ?’ he demanded after a pause, ‘ that are thus travelling ; ye are too few to form a band, and yet ye say ye are going to the interior.’

‘ We are merchants,’ said the other.

‘ And what may that be ?’ said the Norseman.

‘ Not know what merchants are ? Ass !’ said the younger traveller contemptuously.

‘ Hush !’ said his companion, as Eric’s eyes flashed, ‘ he knows not the meaning of merchants ; but thou wouldest not understand many of *his* everyday phrases. We carry goods,’ he continued to Eric, ‘ from one place to another, exchanging them as we go : thus, we now have a load of furs from the far north, which we shall carry to some inland or southern town or castle, and there exchange them for metals, iron or gold, or for cattle, or for whatever else we need.’

‘ That is not the way with us Northmen,’ said Eric ; ‘ when *we* need a thing we take it, and do not barter for

it like slaves ; it is our right as freeborn men, and we cut down all who oppose us.'

The younger stranger, after his companion's rebuke, with difficulty restrained himself ; and now that he heard their occupation spoken of with so much scorn, he could not help exclaiming :

' That is to say that we gain by fair and honest means what ye do by violence and robbery.'

Eric's blood flew to his face, as he said : ' Thou darest !' at the same moment laying his hand upon his dagger.

But the elder traveller interposed :

' Peace, young men ! Wrangle not. Gotherb, thou art too hasty with thy tongue. Young sir, take it not ill of Gotherb that he defends with warmth the trade he has learnt from his father. It is needful that there should be variety in the way people live ; all cannot gain their booty by their valour as ye do, and it is not shame to the weaker that they endeavour to get a livelihood by quiet means, since they wrong no one, and only wish to save themselves from starving.'

Eric, like most other generous-hearted youths, was won by frankness and openness, and though this speech might well be termed a rebuke to himself, so far from being offended at it, he extended his hand to the speaker, saying :

' Well said, friend ; thou art worthy to be a counsellor among us.'

' And who,' said the elder traveller, whose name was Furchen, after a short pause, ' who has succeeded Oscar in his rule over his people—his son ?'

' No,' replied Eric, ' his daughter Rhunelda.'

'And is she likely to give peaceful folk a kindly or good reception? Should we receive protection and encouragement?'

'I scarce think so,' said Eric, 'though it is hard for me to say it—I was brought up with her; but she is wild, and just now she and her people are preparing to take bloody vengeance for her father's death.'

'Then,' said Furchen, 'we shall do well to keep to our former plan, and with dawn of day make what speed we can for the interior. Who art thou?' he said suddenly, regarding Eric with a keen, though kindly glance, 'who seemest thus to be wandering alone, when from thine appearance one would well have thought that thou wouldest have been, if not the head, at least a leading member of some gallant band.'

There was something inexpressibly winning in this man; his very tone and look inspired confidence, and seemed to call for open speaking on the part of those with whom he was conversing. Eric had never been so much drawn to any man, had such trust in any one, since the days when he used to pour out all his mind at the feet of John; and he could not help telling his new friend, though he only now saw him for the first time, the story of his being brought up and then expelled from Oscar's house; how he had lived in the interval, and how it was that he was now flying, in danger of his life, from the wrath of Rhunelda.

Furchen listened attentively, and when Eric had finished, he said very quietly, restraining with a glance the impatience of Gottherb, who was evidently ready with some eager remark:

'I do not altogether understand thy story, good youth, or how it was that thou refusedst to be enlisted in Oscar's band of revenge-seekers; surely it was the quickest way to glory?'

'I did it,' answered Eric, for the first time with some hesitation, 'because I had promised John that I would learn to forgive.'

'And who was John?' asked Furchen, still restraining Gottherb.

'A Christian captive,' answered Eric; and then told the story, as much as he knew of it, of the poor old man.

'Art thou a Christian?' asked Furchen, with peculiar emphasis.

'Yes,' answered Eric, his heart throbbing he knew not why.

'Then,' said Furchen, extending both his hands to him, 'I greet thee. We too are Christians, and little did we expect to meet a brother in the faith in these wild deserts. I honour thee for what thou hast done; knowing little, thou hast acted up to that little.'

Eric's eyes drooped, and his colour deepened beneath Furchen's grave words of praise, which were spoken with the air of a man who has a right to praise or to blame. There was a short pause, then Gottherb asked:

'Whither art thou going? Thou spakest of seeking some one.'

'My grandfather, Thorganger; it is my present purpose to find him if possible.'

'Why,' exclaimed Gottherb joyfully, 'that is whither we are bound, for his castle far in the inland; we have had many dealings with the gallant old chief.'

'Thou art then,' said Furchen, when the first expressions of surprise on both sides had passed between the young men, 'the son of his daughter who perished in the burning of Holdar's castle ?'

'Thou hast heard of that, then ?' cried Eric.

'Father, dost thou remember ?' asked Gottherb.

'Very well,' replied Furchen ; 'I was at Thorganger's castle when the news was brought, and terrible was his anger. His daughter had disobeyed him by marrying whom she did : her mother was a foreign captive whom Thorganger had brought home from the far south, Gunhilda brooked not well her father's control ; and when he refused her permission to marry the young sea-king, she ran away from him. But all was forgotten when he heard of her terrible death, and he would have taken severe vengeance for it upon the guilty attackers, but that he then lay ill of a fever, and before he could again bear arms they were beyond the reach of pursuit. The only one who survived to tell the tale, said indeed that the mother had saved her babe from the fire ; but as nothing was ever heard of it afterwards, all concluded that it had only escaped the flames to perish by the Northman's sword. It is the one good deed that I ever heard of Oscar, that he saved thee and brought thee up. And why hast thou never sought out thy grandfather before ?'

'I lived,' answered Eric; 'after I was expelled from Oscar's house, for many years with my father's foster-brother, who has indeed acted the part of a relation by me. I have only lately learnt that my grandfather lived still ; and as my uncle, by being accessory to Oscar's death, has deeply involved himself in the

feud with Rhunelda, against whom I would not willingly fight, I determined to seek my grandfather, to fight under him if I could find him ; if not, to while away the time. Things change rapidly with us ; by autumn, I may be able to form a band of my own. But say ye that ye know that Thorganger is alive ?

‘ He was, when last we heard of him,’ replied Gottherb, ‘ but that is well-nigh six years ago ; we have been wandering so long in the far north. But if he be dead, he has sons to succeed him. Might not Eric journey with us, father ? it would be pleasant company by the way.’

‘ If he will, he shall be most heartily welcome,’ rejoined Furchen kindly.

This was just the sort of invitation that Eric needed to settle his plans ; his determination to seek his grandfather had been, as he said, in great measure prompted by his having nothing else to do, but also it was partly owing to his desire to sweep away that ever-abiding doubt as to who or what his parents were. To be asked to go with a man like Furchen, who knew his grandfather, and who had in a great degreee taken his fancy, gave the requisite stability to his projects, and he eagerly accepted the offer. Furchen then proposed that as it was waxing late they should take some hours of repose previous to their journey. This was agreed to by his companions, and each set about making himself comfortable for the night. As Eric moved, Furchen observed that he was stiff ; and this led to his inquiring if he were hurt. Eric told him the story of his fight with Gung of the axe, adding that the wound was very much better ; indeed, that he scarcely felt it at all.

'Perchance I can do something for thee,' said Furchen; 'as a merchant, I am a little acquainted with the art of healing. Undo that package, Gottherb.'

His son obeyed, and from the various articles it contained Furchen selected a small earthen pot filled with a fragrant ointment, which he applied, though sparingly, to Eric's shoulder, having first washed the wound with cold water; this application, he assured Eric, would do more for him than even Dame Ultha's magic herbs and spell. Then they severally laid themselves down to rest, Eric in his old position before he had been disturbed by the arrival of the strangers, the father and son at a little distance from him, while the servants arranged themselves near the goods of which they had the charge.

CHAPTER IX.

'Onward they wandered many a weary mile,
O'er hill and vale, through noisome bog and moss.
What seek they thus abroad, through storm and flood,
When they might safely rest at home,
In plenty and in comfort?
'Tis but the shadow of a shade,
The echo of a breath—
The yellow gold!'

DURING the next day, and indeed for several days, the new friends travelled on without accident or incident of importance; they passed through a wildly magnifi-

cent country, with lofty savage hills, deep valleys where rapid streams foamed and frothed on their way to the sea, gloomy woods where they heard the howl of the wolf and the croak of the raven; from time to time they had to cross wide heaths or dangerous moorasses. They met no one, or saw sign of human habitation or tillage; and once or twice only the ruins of a rude bridge spanning some torrent told that the track had at one time been traversed by marauding bands. But all was now deserted and silent; the Northmen preferred seeking their booty in richer lands and more favoured climes to pillaging their own waste and barren country. Thus the little party journeyed on, ever directing their steps southward, and farther from the sea.

The young men hunted the deer and other wild animals of the forest, or fished in the lakes and streams; and ever as Eric grew stronger, he more and more surprised his companions, not only by his activity and skill, but also by his power of patient endurance, that they would hardly have expected from his slightly-built frame.

Eric, on his part, was also very well content with his present associates. He soon, indeed, lost all his reverence for Gottherb, who, scarcely his superior in more peaceful arts, with a rough and hasty temper, was his inferior in handling his weapon, and in pursuing the chase, things that Eric naturally regarded of the highest importance; but for Furchen his love and esteem were unbounded.

The elder merchant had travelled much, and could tell many tales of foreign countries far beyond the

bounds to which the Northmen were in the habit of carrying their piratical expeditions ; he possessed a keen penetration and insight into men's characters that in a later age would have made him a leader among his equals. Eric felt that his companion knew him, and saw deeper into his motives than even he did himself ; but this knowledge was accompanied by no envious or suspicious feeling. Furchen's real kindness of heart could not be for one moment mistaken, and Eric's sentiment for him was that of admiration. Furchen, on his side, was delighted with Eric ; the youth's simple-hearted goodness charmed and yet surprised him : it presented such strange contrasts, for in most things Eric's opinions were those of his age and country. Honour and truth were natural to him as a Northman, and the only Christian virtue that his teachers had had time to impress upon him, so as to make it in any way the rule of his life, was forgiveness of his enemies. And this he had taken up with all his heart ; for the sake of it he had given up a home, and been willing to be called 'coward'—that term of all others most dreaded by the warriors of his nation. Yet he did not see that there was any merit in all this ; he only looked upon it as the keeping of his word to John. Furchen listened and marvelled ; it reminded him of the tales he had heard of the early Christians, so unlike was it to what he was accustomed, though born of Christian parents ; and he felt ashamed when Eric asked him simply one day, hearing that his home was in the south, and that he had come to Scandinavia of his own free will, not as a captive, whether he were journeying for the sake of preaching the Gospel, like those missionaries and apostles of whom John used

to tell. Furchen felt with a pang of remorse that a far different motive had prompted him and his son to risk their lives among the savage pirates of the north, the desire of gaining money.

For Gottherb, Eric remained a mystery, the young merchant frankly owned that he could not understand why Eric should not, when the opportunity was presented to him, have fought against Oscar, and sought vengeance for the injustice he suffered in his boyhood, the accounts of which casually and by accident crept out in conversation, for Eric was too proud to be willing to expose to strangers the discords and cruelties of his countrymen. Gottherb acknowledged that with far less provocation than Eric had received he would have enrolled himself in the list of Oscar's foes, and he seemed to think that it would have been rather a pleasant adventure to have battled against Rhunelda, and taken her prisoner, and forced her to marry him whether she would or not; and when Eric spoke of his promise to John, Gottherb laughed and said that to carry that notion out fully one must retire from the world, that it was one thing to devote one's life to the seeking of vengeance and quite another to punish people when they ill-treated you. It often gave Furchen a considerable amount of trouble to preserve peace between the young men.

At last, on the twentieth day after they had started, for they travelled but slowly, they arrived in a long valley that sloped towards the north, and was bounded east and west by precipitous hills. They moved along this valley, keeping by the side of a little river that flowed on calmly and placidly, very unlike the brawl-

ing streams in the neighbourhood of Eric's home. The valley was green and the overhanging hillsides were covered with woods of dwarf oaks and ash. All betokened a milder climate and more peaceful dwellers.

'We will go but as far as that clump of trees and running stream,' said Furchen; 'there we will make our camp for the night, and to-morrow will mount that hill yonder. I am much mistaken if when we have reached the summit, we do not find ourselves somewhere near the castle of Thorganger.'

This they accordingly did; the thicket gained, they paused, and while the servants unloaded the weary horses, the young men started to hunt something for supper. For a while they kept together; Gottherb however was too impatient a hunter to be a successful one, and he assorted in this respect ill with Eric, who possessed to a large degree that quiet perseverance which is willing to wait until the occasion offers or the prey appears, but which never leaves a track when once it has been found; that cares not how long before success crowns its efforts, provided that it does succeed at last. They therefore soon separated, Gottherb keeping to the banks of the stream, while Eric sought for game higher up the sides of the hill.

It was a delicious evening; the sun was just setting, and the air was soft and mild. Eric's foot sank at each step in the long grass, and he wandered on in a sort of dreamy enjoyment that had grown upon him since his wound, and that sometimes plunged him into reveries that lasted for hours. It was only at the remembrance of how Gottherb would jeer should he return empty-handed, that roused him from his pleasing reflections;

and changing his dawdling walk for a quick decided step, he set about in real earnest looking for some supper.

He had not gone very far, when his ear caught the sound of some creature rushing over the ground ; he paused in a tiny open glade, and the next moment a stag darted across the space in front of him. He drew his bow, the arrow flew true to its aim, and the animal fell ; Eric sprang forward with an exclamation of triumph ; but at the same instant two large dogs rushed from the thicket in the direction whence the deer had come, and close upon them followed two or three hunters dressed in tanned skins and armed with bows and long knives. They gave vent loudly to their disappointment when they found their quarry down, and angrily reproached Eric with having interfered with other folk's game.

'I knew not that it was yours,' retorted Eric ; 'the creature came across my path and I shot it ; I knew not ye were following it. Besides, if I had not struck it when I did, the stag would have been of little use either to ye or to me ; ere this it would have been couched in the deepest thicket.'

The fact that this taunt was true, did not at all tend to lessen the anger of the disappointed huntsmen, and one of them said :

'Ay, comrades, I know this boy and of what sort he is ; he is one of those degenerate Northmen, who let others fight, and then by coming in at the last hour obtain the credit that belongs to those who have borne all the combat. I saw him scarce half an hour ago sauntering along, too idle and too cowardly to rouse the

deer for himself; but when *our* quarry is almost spent with running and can hardly move another yard, then he comes and shoots it, forsooth, and says: “*I* have killed the deer!” what think ye? A ducking in the stream were but meet punishment for such conduct.’

‘It is false!’ cried Eric passionately; ‘and ye are liars who say it. Retract thy words, fellow!’

‘Come on, then,’ said the other, a man of gigantic frame; ‘we will see if thou canst wrestle as well as draw bow.’

Eric, forgetful of his enfeebled frame, threw himself against his adversary with all his might, and they struggled fiercely.

Two of the hunter’s companions wished to assist him, but a third withheld them, saying:

‘Let them alone. Burgon can defend himself; and the other is but a boy.’

Before, however, the strife could be decided either way, a fifth person arrived on the scene. This was a man of scarcely less than eighty years, but his step was still light and active, and living much in the open air—with perhaps a more temperate diet than many of his countrymen, who, although they were capable of bearing great fatigue and privations, nevertheless, when the occasion offered, feasted to excess—had preserved an almost youthful brilliance of colouring. At the appearance of this venerable person, the combatants involuntarily, and, as it were, by mutual consent, ceased their strife, though they still stood opposed, glaring at one another, ready at the first signal again to engage.

‘What means this, Burgon?’ said the new comer,

sternly and authoritatively. ‘Why wrangle ye, instead of bringing home the deer?’

Burgon answered by telling how Eric had interrupted their sport, and how that they only delayed to chastise an insolent stranger, who, too idle to seek for himself, was ready enough to take advantage of other men’s labours; in all of which he was fully supported and corroborated by his companions.

‘What meanest thou by this, boy?’ said the old man, turning with frowning brow towards Eric. But when he saw his face he exclaimed, ‘Surely that reminds me of those long dead! Who art thou, lad? Whence comest thou?’

‘My name is Eric,’ replied the youth. ‘I come from the north, and am travelling to the inland.’

‘And why didst interfere with my sport?’ asked the old man, resuming his first sharp tone.

‘So please you,’ said Eric, ‘I knew not that the deer was hunted; there was no baying of hounds, no calling of the huntsmen. When it passed by there was no one in sight. It was going swiftly, to be sure; but there was no sign of its being hard pressed. I was out seeking somewhat for supper, and I shot it.’

‘Is it indeed as the lad says?’ exclaimed the old hunter, turning angrily towards his attendants. ‘Did ye *see* him strike down the deer?’

‘No,’ answered Burgon, still acting as spokesman, though it was manifest that he uttered the word with reluctance. ‘When we came up the deer was down, and the youth standing beside it ready to——’

‘Caitifs!’ interrupted the old man, passionately stamping his foot. ‘Caitifs, all of ye! Even if the boy did

wrong, and interfered with your sport—which he did not do, but only hunted, as he had a right in the open forest—I would have pardoned him if he *had* done it, to shame ye, laggards! Who ever heard of letting a deer escape from one's sight? Because I am no longer able to be with ye every step of the way, ye loiter, like cowards that ye are; and then ye fall foul of the man who has killed a deer to which ye had forfeited every claim. Out upon ye! out upon ye! Ye deserve to be flogged, every one of ye! Art thou travelling alone, good youth?' he said, suddenly softening his tone, and addressing Eric, who had stood by in amazement, wondering what sort of men these were who thus submitted to be rated.

'No,' he answered; he was journeying with friends, who were even now expecting him back with the game.

'Then, Truben,' said the old man, addressing another of his followers, 'carry thou the deer to the youth's friends, for he looks weary; and then make the best of thy way home, and loiter not. Thou art sore spent, boy,' he continued to Eric, his quick eye noting that now the flush of excitement was gone, the youth was very pale; 'hast been hurt?'

'Yes, some time ago, in my shoulder,' said Eric; 'it is but slight.'

'Nevertheless, thou art not fit to carry the deer,' replied the other. 'Truben will take it for thee. Good-even to thee.'

And he turned away, followed by the hunters, Truben only remaining to do his bidding about the deer.

As he lifted the animal on to his shoulder, Eric, observing that it was almost more than he could man-

age, offered his aid, which, however, the man declined, saying gruffly, though with no unfriendly accents :

‘Thou heardest that I was told to carry it, and spare thee. I do not exactly the contrary the moment my lord’s back is turned.’

And they moved on, Eric more and more wondering who this despotic old man could be, who thus ruled with apparently unlimited authority these hardy hunters, and towards whom he felt grateful for his timely interference on his behalf. Thus they pursued their way in silence ; for Truben, though not actually surly, made it sufficiently evident that he would rather not talk, and Eric had enough to do to keep the right track back to the camp, where they arrived in good time, and found Furchen growing uneasy at the non-appearance of the young hunters, for it was getting late, and it was long since they had tasted food. However, the arrival of Eric and his game at once put an end to anxiety on this score. While Truben gave the deer to the men, Eric drew Furchen apart and told him who his companion was, and in what manner he had met him.

‘I should imagine, from thy tale,’ said the merchant, ‘that thou hast seen Thorganger himself ; but I will ask of the man.’

He turned towards Truben, and invited him to share their supper. Truben looked with manifest longing, for the deer was a particularly fat one, and the fire over which the steaks were to be cooked was bright and clear ; but he shook his head.

‘I must not,’ he said ; ‘my lord will expect me back to supper.’

‘And who is thy lord ?’ asked Furchen.

'Thorganger,' was the reply.

'Ah!' said the merchant; 'I am right glad to hear that the gallant old chief is alive and well. Bear him my greetings, friend, and tell him that Furchen the merchant will be with him to-morrow.'

'Art thou Furchen the merchant?' said the man. 'This is indeed good news for my lord. It is a weary while since thou wert here last.'

'Dost remember it?' said Furchen, looking at him with more attention and curiosity.

'Ay, marry I do!' answered Truben; 'and all the gallant hunts we had. Times are changed since then.'

'We will yet be joyful,' said Furchen. 'Tell thy lord I bring him glad tidings from the north.'

'Is this thy son?' continued Truben, looking towards Eric. 'Burgon will indeed be vexed when he knows who it is he struck.'

'No, he is not my son; but Gottherb is with us,' answered Furchen. 'But it is one whom ye will all know and love some day. Fare thee well. If thou wilt not stay to supper, I will not detain thee; it is late, and thou wilt scarce reach the castle before night-fall. Forget not my message to thy lord.'

Hardly had Truben disappeared in the one direction, when Gottherb came in from the other. He had been unsuccessful, and was, therefore, out of temper. Nor did the sight of Eric's meat roasting over the fire tend to restore him. It is true that he took his full share of the supper; but it was evident that, with every mouthful, he had a sharp bite of envy at his rival's better skill or better fortune. As soon as supper was over, instead of staying, as was the wont of the young men,

listening to Furchen's talk, he went straight to his couch at some little distance, where he threw himself down in no very amiable frame of mind.

Eric, on the contrary, remained long with Furchen, learning from him all that he possibly could of his family history, more particularly what concerned his grandfather's character; and the dawn was already purpling in the east when they lay down to rest.

The sun was high before Eric woke, and the camp was astir; one of the men was feeding the horses, while Gottherb and another were making up the packages. Furchen and the third were not to be seen. Eric sprang up, and going to Gottherb, asked him where his father was.

'Up and away long before thou wast awake,' rejoined Gottherb; 'leaving us to follow whenever the baggage should be arranged, and it should please thee to rouse. Make me room; dost not see that I want to load that horse?—but helping in such things is far below thee, sir chief; thou canst only do the hunting and such like, and leave the hard work to us poor fellows, while thou takest thy rest.'

'Gottherb,' said Eric, with flashing eyes, 'I know not what thou meanest. Thou knowest that I am always willing to do what I can, and hadst thou but given me a call, I would gladly have risen to help thee.'

Gottherb did not reply, and Eric turning from him began to fasten some of the packages; but after watching him for some minutes at this occupation, the young merchant resumed with his mocking accent:

'Leave that, young sir; leave it to me, I will do it

anon ; I know my place—that it is for you men of war to command, and for us humble merchants to obey you.'

' Gottherb,' said Eric, with a certain dignity of manner his companion had not hitherto noticed in him, ' I would not let those words pass unpunished but for the love I bear to thy father. It is false, and thou knowest it ;' and turning decidedly from him, he continued his occupation.

Gottherb, who had expected an explosion, was so much overawed as not to find words to reply, and in silence they completed their arrangements.

They now steadily kept an upward path through the oak-wood before-mentioned, which, varying in depth, sometimes opened sufficiently to give them a view of the silver stream below, sometimes closed so thickly around them as to allow them to see nothing on either hand but the trunks of the trees. And ever as they advanced, the path became more and more precipitous, until at last, between fifty and one hundred feet from the top, the man who was leading the foremost horse stopped, and declared that it was impossible for the animal, loaded as it was, to climb the steep rocky track.

' Then,' said Gottherb, a little impatiently, ' I suppose that we must take the burthens off them, and let them scramble up as they can.'

' I believe that will be the only way,' replied the man.

This they accordingly put into execution, carrying up the packages by degrees, Eric lending very effectual help, and Gottherb not venturing to interfere with him.

The horses, as soon as they were freed of their loads, scrambled up, as if they knew what was expected of them, arriving at the summit far sooner than their masters, and then occupying themselves with browsing on the short fine grass that grew in the open spaces between the trees, or in nibbling the leaves of those branches that were within their reach.

- Having re-loaded their animals, the little party pressed forward along the top of the hill, from whence they could see, on the opposite side of the valley, separated from them by a deep and rapid river, a castle, which Gottherb pronounced to be the dwelling of Thorganger.

Now that the goal was within view, all seemed to be fired with the desire of reaching it with as little delay as possible; the very horses, as if they knew that rest and food were near at hand, trotted along without needing whip or encouragement of any sort. But they were yet some distance from their destination; and all too soon they reached the path down into the valley which they must descend in order to cross the stream to get to the castle on the farther side. It was a narrow track winding down the bare face of the rock, at the sight of which Gottherb halted his little troop in a sort of despair.

'We can never lead the horses down here,' he said; 'we must take off the heavier part of the loads and let them get down alone. Mind, Eric, a false step would send thee into the river.'

'How it rustles,' said Eric, peering into the depths.

'Yes, indeed,' said his companion; 'it is swollen by the winter rains. I wonder how my father ever man-

aged to get down in the dim light? Are the packs secure, Snitten?

'Yes,' replied Snitten; 'I hope the poor beasts will get down all right, it seems a heathenish practice to send them thus alone.'

'Never fear,' said his master; 'I have seen them get all alone down places where had one attempted to lead them it would have been certain death. Gently, good horses,' he added, patting the neck of the one nearest to him; 'you must choose your own path now, we cannot guide you.'

As if the creature understood him, it tossed its head and then turned to the descent. Instinct told them that the only method of descending with safety was to go as rapidly as possible; and they set off, planting their hind feet firmly on the ground, and moving with a series of bounds. It was an anxious and yet an inspiriting sight, and as they watched the hardy little animals following the lesson nature had given them, the excitement of the race seemed to communicate itself to the two young men, and they imitated their horses, bounding and springing down regardless of the risk they ran, where one false step would have plunged them into the river; now steadyng themselves by laying a hand on a large stone, now catching at one another for support, totally forgetting their recent dispute and jealousy.

They arrived safely at the bottom, out of breath, indeed, but benefited by the race in so far that Gott-herb's latent ill-humour had disappeared. They now stood by the brink of the river and watched it as it rolled on its way, of a dull leaden colour and with a heavy

sullen roar ; as it had worked its way through the bare grey rock on either hand, no over-hanging vegetation relieved the sombre hue.

' How mournful it looks ! ' said Eric, sinking his voice as if the scene oppressed him ; ' does it not seem as if the river was tired and out of temper with its efforts to make everything green and beautiful, and as if it were flowing as dark and gloomy as possible to revenge itself upon the things that would not be bright at its call ? '

Gottherb looked at him in surprise ; he did not understand and had no sympathy with the poetry in Eric's composition : if a place was damp and dark he only thought how to get out of it as soon as possible, and while Eric was gazing on the river, as if the rolling waters had bewitched him, his companion's mind was occupied with the consideration how they were to cross the stream, and he answered Eric's raptures on the savage beauty of the scene by an impatient exclamation against their men for delaying so long in the descent. However, at last all reached the bottom in safety, and Gottherb was relieved from his difficulty by some one hailing them from the other side of the river ; this proved to be Burgon, who, with Truben and several other of Thorganger's followers, had been sent by their lord to point out the ford to the expected guests ; even with this help the passage was hard enough, for all had to swim, and the current flowed deep and rapid.

On the other side was a series of terraces, separated from one another by a wall of bare, almost perpendicular rock, in which rude steps had been cut to assist those ascending to the castle. From terrace to terrace, Thorganger's followers helped to carry the merchandise

and to drag the poor frightened horses, until at length, after a tedious climb, they found themselves on a level platform, on which, towering above them, stood the dwelling of Thorganger.

CHAPTER X.

'High aloft, perched like an eagle's nest upon the crag,
Hangs the proud citadel ; a fearful eye
The trembling peasant sends to note the flaunting flag
That tells if the stern feudal lord be nigh.'

IT was with a strange feeling that Eric passed under the low-browed gateway leading to the narrow courtyard of Thorganger's castle, which, hewn out of the rough stone, stood out before them black and grim, but well harmonising with its savage surroundings. It formed two sides of a square, and was built without any attempt at ornament or architectural design, which, indeed, would have been far beyond both the taste and the capabilities of its founder and the workmen employed upon it. The third side of the square was formed by the rock into which the castle had been, as it were, riveted, and so uneven and irregular was the surface of the walls, so narrow and rare the tiny windows, that it was difficult to tell where the building ended and the rock began.

There was no need of pavement to the courtyard, for the rock was hard and dry enough to answer all such purposes. Opposite to the door by which they had

entered was another, leading to the interior of the castle ; by this stood an elderly man, apparently a sort of steward or seneschal. He offered a cup to the newly-arrived guests as they approached the door, without which, so bitter were the feuds, so widespreading the jealousies, no man would have thought of entering another's house, even when coming by express invitation, but having taken which they were secure from any premeditated treachery ; against the effects of any sudden quarrel with their host or entertainer, no man could of course secure them.

This cup was offered by the seneschal first to Eric, but he was gazing on the massive stone walls, which presented a strong contrast to the wattle or wooden buildings to which he had been accustomed, and did not for the moment perceive the honour intended him ; Gottherb, ever ready, took the cup, exclaiming :

‘ Many thanks to thee, friend ; the clamber up those steep hills of thine makes one thirsty.’

He raised it to his lips, took a deep draught, and then handed it to Eric, who followed his example, though more sparingly ; for, to tell the truth, his uncle had been too poor to supply his followers with aught but mead, and the wine tasted hot and strange to his palate.

They then entered the hall, a long low room with rough stone walls and small windows set in deep recesses. Only when the sun, sinking to the west, shot his slanting rays through these narrow apertures, was the hall fully illuminated ; at all other times there reigned there a grave twilight, now all the more gloomy as it was yet early in the morning.

At the one end of the apartment burnt a fire, round which were occupied several wild-looking men, hunters, who having killed their deer were now roasting him; for then there was no division of labour, and the purveyors for their master's table were often his only cooks. To the newly-arrived travellers, with their appetites sharpened by the keen air, this was a welcome sight. But now appeared Furchen, so attired that Eric for the moment was not certain that it were indeed his companion and friend, or if he saw before him one of those magicians or priests of whom he had often heard tell.

Furchen had exchanged his rough travelling cloak for a long robe of fine grey wool, reaching nearly to his feet, and secured at his waist by a girdle fastened with a silver buckle; from this girdle depended an inkhorn and a roll of parchment. Weapons he had none, unless the tiny curiously-formed dagger he used for holding together the breast of his robe were considered as such. He welcomed his young friends with the air of a man who is already quite at home, and gently chid them for having tarried so long on the way.

'Indeed, father,' said Gottherb, 'so bad are the roads, that instead of blaming us for delaying, thou oughtest rather to be surprised that thou seest us so soon.'

Without paying any attention to his son's excuse, Furchen requested Eric to follow him to his grandfather's presence. Before, however, he led him up, he drew him apart, to tell him that Thorganger was doubly gratified to hear of his arrival, as both his sons had been killed the previous year in an expedition against the English coast, the one dying without children at all,

the other only leaving a daughter ; that Eric was thus the sole male descendant of the old Viking, who accordingly rejoiced alike over the fact that there would still be a representative of his family in future ages, and that he had at last found his daughter's long lost son.

Thus discoursing, Furchen led Eric through the door by which he had himself entered the hall, and up the narrow winding stairs cut in the depth of the wall, by which they gained the audience chamber ; for Thorganger, in his way, was a petty king, with a far wider extent of country over which he ruled than ever Oscar could boast ; and he held a kind of court, and administered a rude patriarchal justice among such of his followers and dependents as were willing to have their differences settled in anything like a peaceable way, instead of each righting himself as best he could by force of arms.

It was a long narrow apartment into which Eric was now introduced, with somewhat larger windows than those of the hall below, and it was consequently lighter ; and Eric could distinguish the forms of several of Thorganger's jarls who stood round him, leaning upon their long axes like so many statues of the god of war, for whom many of them would have served for models, with their straight well-proportioned limbs, and their bright sparkling eyes.

Thorganger held out his hand to his grandson, who, as the custom was, bent the knee before him ; the old chief raised him and embraced him heartily, but Furchen heard low murmurs of regret among the jarls that the last hope of their race should have so slight a form

and so delicate an appearance as the youth now before them. Thorganger, however, had no feelings but those of joy, for in Eric's dark hair and eyes he recognised the features of his long lost daughter. He led him to the window that he might examine him better; and the stern warriors might pardon to the old man tears that they had never seen him shed when he heard of the loss of those dearest to him, but which, on this unexpected happiness, nature would not be denied as her right. Thorganger's voice failed a little as he blessed his grandson and bade him be strong and true, for Furchen had already told him of Eric's being a Christian.

Thorganger then turned and presented his grandson to the jarls as their future leader and chief. They received him without objection, though without much enthusiasm; but the thought that he had to win their hearts by his boldness and dexterity only brought the colour to Eric's cheek and the light to his eye. Thorganger now proposed that they should partake of the morning meal, and leaning on his grandson's arm, to show that he had fully adopted him, rather than from any actual need of support, for, as already noted, he was very active in all his movements, he led the way downstairs.

On entering the hall they found that several long tables had been arranged, round which were crowded the followers of Thorganger, who happened to be either at the castle or in its immediate neighbourhood. Thorganger took his seat at the upper end of the board set apart for the chief, his head jarls and principal guests; placed Eric upon his right hand, while he called to

Furchen and Gottherb to come and seat themselves near him, reserving however the seat immediately on his left.

Scarcely had he completed this arrangement when the door at the farther end of the hall was opened, and a girl of about seventeen or eighteen entered, whom Thorganger hastened to meet, gave her the morning greeting, and then presented her to Eric as her kinswoman, Elfleda, the daughter of his mother's brother. Elfleda received her cousin rather stiffly, and then passed on to her place exactly opposite to him, on Thorganger's left hand. She had been followed into the hall by three damsels, two of whom mingled with the crowd at the lower end of the apartment, while the third stood behind her mistress's chair; an unusual sight for Eric, who had been accustomed to see Rhunelda move among her father's followers without attendance of any kind. In truth, females there were none in Oscar's rude household except one almost blind old woman, who, as the phrase went, had 'tended' Rhunelda when she was a baby.

From her attendant, Eric's eye naturally wandered to Elfleda herself; and even had there been nothing in the way she was treated to strike him, his attention could hardly have failed to be attracted by her. Tall and slight, Elfleda plainly gave tokens that there was southern blood in her veins, by the soft dark brown hair that hung in long plaits over her shoulders; by the dark pencilled brows and black lashes, beneath which, however, sparkled the large open blue eye of her father's race. The general expression of her features was gentle and yet proud, and to a youth differently brought

up would have been irresistibly attractive ; but to Eric, whose idea of womanhood was Rhunelda's fiery energetic being, there was something wanting in Elfleda's soft beauty, and the care, almost shudder, with which she drew aside her long robe, formed from the finest wool, and dyed a deep purplish-blue, when it swept against a buckler in her passage up the hall, excited a feeling rather akin to contempt in her cousin's mind.

He had plenty of time to make these observations, for Thorganger talked long and earnestly to Furchen on subjects little interesting to him ; however, at last his grandfather turned towards him, saying :

'I have heard that as Oscar leaves no son, his daughter will lead his people.'

'Yes,' replied Eric, 'and she will lead them well, too.'

'But surely,' said Elfleda, 'a battle-field is not the proper place for a maiden ; her fears would overcome her.'

'Rhunelda knows not fear,' answered her cousin. 'She has already fought many times by her father's side, and borne herself right bravely. What she wants in strength, she fully makes up in courage and spirit ; she is nowhere so much at ease as among the din of a fight.'

Again Elfleda shuddered :

'Could she not find some trusty friend among her father's vassals, who would lead them in war while she governed them in peace ?'

Eric opened his eyes.

'It would indeed be a damping of the spirit of the sons of the north,' he said, 'if their leaders should

refuse to go forth with them, and share the dangers and the glory.'

Thorganger and Furchen exchanged glances of amusement, and the former said :

'Eric has been brought up, Elfleda, where the damsels go forth to war as well as the youths, and where it would be considered as much shame for the one to hold back as the other. Besides, there would be risk for Rhunelda to yield the rule of her people to another; if once they followed another leader in war, they would refuse to return to her in peace.'

'I did not mean that,' said Elfleda, who having been for so long the only representative of her grandfather's race in the next generation, had perhaps considered what would be the best line of conduct to pursue, should she be placed in a position similar to that of Rhunelda.—'I did not mean that; but that she should wed some strong trusty man of the tribe, who would protect her, and rule her father's vassals.'

Thorganger was in many respects far beyond his age, and in none more than in a keen observation of human nature. He was accustomed to watch men, and then to read them more or less correctly, and therefore the very slight flush that mantled in Eric's cheek at Elfleda's last speech did not escape his notice; and he smiled as if some new idea had entered his mind. He replied to Elfleda's remark :

'Eric manifestly thinks that Rhunelda had better follow even her husband to war; he does not approve of the men going to fight, and the women remaining behind.' He then, addressing Furchen, added that he wished to have a few words alone with him, and rising

he would have left the table, but Elfleda prevented him.

'Sweyn has prepared a song expressly on my cousin's return,' she said; 'wilt thou hear him now, or at the evening meal ?'

Thorganger was too good a Northman, had his business been more pressing, to refuse to hear his bard, at whatever hour he might wish to perform to him ; he therefore nodded assent to Sweyn, a tall, wild-looking man of about thirty, with light-blue eyes and shaggy hair, who took his place near the chief's seat, and began to sing to a low irregular chant, varied at times by a few chords clashed upon his harp, a song in which he described the deeds of Eric's ancestors—how they had fought and fallen, triumphant even in death.

Eric knew that his grandfather's household was Christian, and yet he was surprised to hear in Sweyn's rhyme fully as many allusions to Odin and Thor, deprecations of their vengeance, calling on them for help, as in the lines with which the bards he had been accustomed to hear had encouraged their hearers to fight bravely that they too might deserve a place in the halls of Valhalla ; but he had little time to reflect, for Sweyn's rhyme was stormy, and carried his listeners on like a stream.

He spoke of deeds accomplished by Thorganger in his might ; then suddenly changing his triumphal strain to a wildly mournful minor key, he told of the loss of Thorganger's two sons in their strength, how the young boughs had been cut away while they were yet fresh and green, and how the hoary parent stem had been left alone in its desolation. When the minds of his hearers had

been brought up to the desired pitch of sorrow and sympathy, Sweyn struck a few clear notes of joy, and in another and more rapid measure he told how that in these last days a new branch had suddenly budded and sprung into life; and then went on to describe the blessings that they all expected from this new-found representative of their race.

Eric's heart beat high at the thought of the destiny before him, and the elder jarls, as they watched his eye sparkle and his cheek flush, augured great things from their young chief, and Elfleda glanced at him with a softening expression.

Long and loud was the applause that followed the conclusion of Sweyn's song, and it was some time before Thorganger could make himself heard to thank the bard, and to reward him with a gold piece, another novelty for Eric, whose uncle was far too poor to keep a household bard; and on the rare occasions of Oscar's feasts, that chief had rewarded his moody minstrel with something of far less value than a gold piece, which precious metal, except immediately after a successful foray, was found in scant enough quantities in the house of Oscar the sea-king.

Thorganger now fulfilled his intention of talking apart with Furchen, with whom he had a long conversation, lasting several hours; while the younger members of the household, including Eric and Gottherb, went out hunting. The former found himself in the peculiar position of being the commander of men, who no longer than the day before had been ready almost to kill him for exercising the free right of chasing in the forest, but who now were on the watch to obey his slightest

wish. They on their part, as the day wore on, grew more and more attached to their young lord; and when they saw him strike down a deer at one hundred paces, their shouts re-echoed far and wide through the wood, and they would have followed him through fire and water.

As they returned to the castle they were met by Elfleda, who had wandered forth for a little airing before the evening meal. Her delicate beauty shone out from beneath her hood made of fine fur; and as she joined her cousin and heard the relation of the day's sport, she gently chid him for running so many risks, while at the same time her sparkling eye and flushing cheek showed that she took a keen interest in the tale that was told her.

Thorganger met them on the threshold, and though he blamed his granddaughter for venturing out alone at a time when the frequency of wolves made it unsafe to go abroad unarmed, it was evident from his look that he was well pleased to see her in such company; but his hopes of a union between his grandchildren, if indeed he had formed any, were destined to be rudely shaken before any great lapse of time.

CHAPTER XI.¹

“ Oh ! ask me to do aught but this !
For I must still be true.”
“ You own no words of love were said ;
Why should she think of you ?”

“ It does not need a spoken word
To tell the heart’s deep tale :
A glance, a smile, a sigh’s enough
To rend away the veil.”

‘ ERIC, I wish to speak with thee,’ said Thorganger, two or three mornings after the arrival of his grandson at the castle.

Eric, together with the rest of the household, was in the hall examining Furchen’s wares. The merchant had just unpacked his bales of woollen cloths, furs, and even a small quantity of silk, brought with him from some far-distant land. It was therefore unwillingly that Eric moved. Long though he had travelled in Furchen’s company, he had never yet seen the contents of his packages ; the merchant not unnaturally being disinclined to display his riches when far from any shelter or protection.

But Thorganger’s orders must be obeyed, and so Eric accompanied him to a little room, scooped out as it were in the depths of the tower, dimly lighted by one window placed in the thickness of the wall ; here Thorganger settled himself in a rudely-carved wooden chair, signed to his grandson to find a seat on the window-sill, and thus began :

‘ Eric, I wanted to speak with thee ; thou knowest

thou art my heir, and that when I die, thou wilt lead my people. Thou canst not yet fully understand the importance of this, and I am glad that I am still here to teach thee what is required of thee, for there will be something else expected of thee than to be able to lead thy band well in war; and I am thankful thou art come now, for my time for active warfare is past.'

'Nay, indeed, grandfather,' said Eric eagerly; 'thou art yet strong and well, and wilt be with us many years.'

Thorganger smiled.

'Listen to me,' he said: 'hadst thou not come, when I died the brave band that I have kept together so long, and trained so carefully, would have been scattered, for my jarls would never have patiently followed a woman's leading, as Oscar's vassals seem to have done.'

'Pardon,' interrupted Eric, for at that time there was none of that stiff formal respect for age, which a few centuries later kept the younger people silent in the presence of their elders; 'thou hast, I think, mistaken both Rhunelda's character and that of her followers. She is woman indeed in stature, but a man in heart; she is always to be seen glancing like a meteor in the thickest of the fight, and not more surely does the black raven point to victory, than does Rhunelda with her flashing sword and unerring stroke.'

'Be that as it may,' said Thorganger, 'Elfleda is not fitted by constitution or inclination to take such a part; nevertheless she was the last of an old race, and there have not been wanting those who were ready to follow her, should she, by giving her hand to one of the

bravest of jarls, give him a title to be their leader. Eric, thou art a stranger among us ; we know not what thou art capable of. Were I to die before thou hadst had time to prove thy courage, though there be many who would follow and obey, for the love they bear to me, there are some who would raise Elfleda in opposition to thee ; and if thou art the male descendant of our race, she has lived long among us, and is known. I want to avoid any such contention, which would be followed by many calamities. While ye two were struggling for the mastery, and weakening yourselves by your strife, a third person would step in and carry away all the influence and power that I have spent so many years in building up. Eric, thou must marry Elfleda.'

'I cannot !' exclaimed Eric, with the first start of dismay at such a proposal.

'And why not ?' said Thorganger, not displeased, nor perhaps surprised at this reception of his plan. 'Elfleda is gentle, loving, and beauteous ; she has not, perhaps, the wild courage of thy daughters of the north, but the day for the women who fight by their husbands' sides is rapidly passing ; as civilisation advances, as the number of Christians increases, it will be seen more and more that the woman's place is not on the field of battle, but at home ; and thou wilt want, not a warrior, but a housewife, who will bring up thy children well, and nurse thee when thou art old and infirm.'

Eric did not answer for a moment ; Thorganger's ideas were new to him, as indeed they would have been to most of his contemporaries, and he paused to think, before he said quietly and respectfully, but very firmly :

'Grandfather, I am sorry to disappoint thee, and say thee nay, but it cannot be ; I cannot wed Elfleda, for I love another.'

'And whom ?' asked Thorganger, while his brows bent ominously.

'Rhunelda !' was the simple reply.

Thorganger's eyes flashed fury as he answered :

'What ! thou darest to put the child of a petty, piratical sea-king in comparison with my granddaughter ? Thou darest to name this Rhunelda, who seems to have forgotten that she is a woman, and that as such she should be modest, in the same breath with Elfleda, whose hand has been sought even by princes ? Boy ! knowest thou not that I have a right to command thee ? Were I to disinherit thee, as, indeed, I have a great mind to do, where wouldest thou be ?'

Eric answered calmly and boldly, and not without a certain dignity of manner :

'Grandfather, I am grieved to do thee a displeasure, but so it is, and I cannot alter it. I love Rhunelda, and I can wed none else ; if thou turnest me out, I shall but be in the same position in which I was when I met Furchen the merchant ; wandering and homeless, but still not without hope of some day distinguishing myself. It is true,' he added, 'that I shall no longer have the object of searching thee out, but on the other hand my wound is healed, and I have learnt somewhat.'

Thorganger could not help being struck by the independent spirit manifested by this speech. Though by nature possessing an exceedingly irascible temper,

habit had in some measure taught him to control it, and he now asked more quietly :

‘ And does Rhunelda love thee ?’

‘ Ah ! replied Eric sadly, ‘ what would I not give to have that doubt solved ? Sometimes I think she does, and yet her last piece of conduct towards me——’

‘ Then !’ exclaimed Thorganger, ‘ thou canst hold that as an excuse for wedding Elfleda. It might be very well for thee when thou knewest of no kindred but thy father’s foster-brother to wait patiently on this proud girl’s will and pleasure ; but now it little beseems thee, as my grandson, to proffer thyself where thou art despised. Thou art a foolish inexperienced boy, and must listen to those who art older than thou.’

Eric was now sorely perplexed ; he had had a sign of what his grandfather could be when roused to anger, and yet his sense of honour revolted at the thought of giving up Rhunelda for another. Was this keeping his troth as he had so proudly told her he would, on the hillside by her father’s grave ? The very remembrance of Elfleda’s gracious beauty only as it were strengthened his resolution, and in contrast to her clinging, yielding manner, he called up Rhunelda’s vigorous defiant action. Before he spoke, his grandfather resumed :

‘ I tell thee, Eric, flatly, she is beneath thee. Thy mother married below her ; thou must redeem her mistake, and silence for ever any question as to thy lineage. Opposing thee, the jarls must also oppose the daughter of their young chief.’

Eric could answer the former part of this address better than the latter, and he said :

'Oscar's race is at least as high as ours: they trace their descent from the great warrior god, Thor, himself.'

'One would think,' rejoined Thorganger sharply, 'that we were still like our heathen forefathers, and believed in Odin, Thor, and all their crew.'

'Still, grandfather,' persisted Eric, with something like a smile, 'we seem to boast of being descended from Thor, as thine own name tells.'

This was an argument which Thorganger did not feel quite capable of answering, so he a little varied his mode of attack by saying :

'Most probably Rhunelda will marry, and then, indeed, thou wilt be in a ridiculous position.'

'*Then!*' said Eric quietly, though his cheek grew rather pale, 'I shall feel myself released from the pledge that I gave Rhunelda to be ready to help or protect her whenever she should need it.'

'In such a case, then,' said Thorganger, somewhat mollified, 'wouldest thou wed Elfleda?'

'No!' replied the obdurate Eric.

'And wherefore not?' demanded Thorganger, again thoroughly angry.

'Because,' said Eric, 'she is a coward; she turns pale at the sight of a drawn sword; she shudders if you do but speak of wars and wounds: such is not the fit mate for a sea-king.'

'Tut, tut, boy!' said Thorganger, 'thou dost not understand it; Elfleda would be brave, if she had a husband's mind and courage to depend upon. Wedding thee, she would forget her fears. She needs but some one to teach her, she will learn readily enough.'

'Then,' said Eric, 'she must find some one else to teach her, some other courage to support her; once again, grandfather, I cannot and I will not wed Elfleda.'

Thorganger perceived that he would gain nothing by prolonging this argument. He was not altogether despairing of success; the very energy with which Eric had resisted his proposal, told him that the youth was wavering, and his observing eye had noted that he liked Elfleda's society. But though not yet without hope, he was disappointed and annoyed at this result of his interview with his grandson; disappointed, because his ambition to secure the continuance of the power, for which he had been striving all his life, and which since the death of his sons had been a kind of bitter mockery, but which had suddenly, in a most unexpected way, appeared to be within his grasp, now again seemed to be eluding him; annoyed, because Furchen, to whom he had communicated his designs for the union of the young people, had hinted, albeit very cautiously, that there might be some opposition to be apprehended on Eric's part; and it galled his pride to think that his failure might be exposed to the keenly observant eye of the quiet but somewhat sarcastic merchant; therefore his tone as he rose to end the discussion, saying: 'We will talk this matter over again,' was anything but a pleased one.

Before, however, he could cross the room, the door was flung open, and a man rushed in crying:

'Is Thorganger here?'

The person who had thus intruded looked between thirty and forty. His buskins were deeply splashed

with mud, and his whole gait was that of a man who had travelled far and in haste.

‘What wantest thou, Wilton?’ asked Thorganger.

Wilton glanced at Eric.

‘Ill tidings are best told without witnesses!’ he said.

‘Thou mayest speak out,’ replied Thorganger; ‘it is Eric, my grandson—thy young chief, Wilton.’

Wilton accordingly began :

‘Horslonger has invaded thy territories; burnt thy village, slain all the men, and carried away the women and children into captivity.’

‘How? When?’ demanded Thorganger hastily.

‘Three days this morrow,’ replied Wilton.

‘And thou hast escaped?’

‘Yes, truly; when the cottages blazed over my head, and all lay dead or dying around me, I escaped to tell thee the tale. Deal with me as thou wilt; I knew my life was forfeit when I fled from the scene of battle; but I have lost everything—home, wife, child, honour; life has no longer charms for me.’

It is impossible for pen to describe Thorganger’s fury when he heard of this outrage. He trembled from head to foot, he ground his teeth; his mouth foamed, his eyes seemed as if they would burst from their sockets, so dilated were they with rage; and when he endeavoured to speak, he could not command his voice. He stamped while struggling to bring out the words, and as if the effort were strangling him, he fell back almost senseless upon his chair.

Eric was much alarmed, but Wilton, more accustomed to these attacks, withheld him as he was rushing for

aid, saying : 'Let be, he will come round in a minute,' and, indeed, while he spoke, Thorganger sat upright, with livid cheeks and an almost vacant expression, as if he could not realise what had happened.

Eric, who possessed a great deal of natural tact, judged it best to take no notice of his grandfather's state, but to talk the matter over with Wilton as though he were unconscious of his presence, in the hope that Thorganger might gradually rouse and attend to what they were saying. The stratagem had the desired effect, for in a few minutes Thorganger said in his natural voice, though perhaps a little fainter, a trifle less decided than usual :

'Wilton, summon the jarls ; I must speak with them.'

When Wilton had departed on his errand, Thorganger extended his hand to Eric :

'Eric !' he said solemnly, '*thou* must lead this expedition, *I* cannot.'

'Thou hast been disturbed by the shock, grandfather,' said Eric soothingly ; 'thou wilt be better anon.'

'Maybe, maybe!' said Thorganger, with a return of the wandering look in his eye, 'but it is well that thou art come. The old oak can scarce longer maintain its position in the ground ; I only pray that it may be spared till the young sapling is sufficiently rooted to take its place.'

He laid his hand upon Eric's head, for the youth had flung himself upon his knees beside him ; but the jarls were entering, and Eric sprang to his feet, while his grandfather, restored to all his usual vigour, watched the faces of each as they entered, as if he would read

their very souls. The expressions were various. Wilton, as he summoned them, had communicated to each the cause of their meeting. On some faces sat a startled look, as if they had been stunned by the greatness of the calamity: on others there burnt a fierce indignation, as they were only waiting the signal to rush like so many demons upon their foes; while some few who had had relations in the fight wore an expression of genuine sorrow, as if nature were struggling to overcome the long-rooted habits of pride and superstition which forbade them to weep for the dead.

One by one they entered, and silently grouped themselves round their leader, whose keen, penetrating eye surveyed them, judging of their tempers; and by the time all were there, Thorganger had decided what measures were to be taken, and he began in a clear, steady voice, neither was there in his manner any trace of his recent weakness and emotion: ‘Countrymen, Northmen, listen! A great outrage has been committed against us. Our lands have been pillaged; our houses burnt; our women carried away captive; our kindred slain. Doth it beseem us to sit quietly at home and let such things be done? To let the rash intruder glory in his first successful attempt, until he is ready to shame us by coming to attack us even in sight of our own dwellings? Shall we wait for this, I say, or shall we show him that we are strong—that we let not such wrongs pass unpunished? I swore to ye when I returned from the last expedition, that a full year should elapse before I sent you out on another. It is for ye to say, whether or not. Will ye rest at home, allow Horslonger to boast of his triumphs? or will ye go forth to danger and to glory?’

'Vengeance! We will have vengeance!' was the universal cry. 'The glory of Thorganger and his brave warriors shall not be insulted, and the insulter go free: To arms! to arms!'

And mingled with the deep, martial roll of the men's voices was the shriller cry of the women, for the news had flown like wild-fire, and all the inmates of the castle had crowded to hear the debate. Old Thorganger's eyes lit up with something of the fire of youth, as he looked round on the kindling assembly.

'It is well,' he said, 'that ye have thus chosen; but, again, I can no longer lead ye forth to battle myself. I am old and feeble, and my breath goes—I cannot strike as I have done. But I send forth with ye my second self—my grandson, Eric. Will ye follow and obey him as ye have done me, or must I find ye another chief?'

Once again the answer appeared to be unanimous: 'We will follow Eric, the son of our leader!' We say *appeared*, for there was one young member of this rough senate, or council of war, who did not speak. This was a young man of about four-and-twenty, with fair hair, and a soft, pleasingly dreamy expression. The face might have been called feminine, but for at times a haughty gleam in the large, fiery, grey eyes. But, in the multitude, his silence was not noticeable, more especially as his opposition to the movement—if, indeed, he wished to express such—was of a purely negative character. And Thorganger might well feel a glow of pride at this warm accepting of his grandson. The preliminary arrangements were soon made, as to how many were to go, when they were to start, etc.; then Thorganger said:

'Bring here the pledge-cup!' Accordingly a boy, who a little later would have been called a page, entered, bearing a large, brown, horn goblet, looped with silver, and filled to the brim with sparkling wine. This he presented to Thorganger, who took it, raised it to his lips, and, distinctly pronouncing the words, 'Glory to our arms! Vengeance on the foe!' drank a deep draught, and handed it to the next eldest jarl, for a present. Eric, though he was to lead the expedition, had yet acquired no fame—was undistinguished by any great deed—and therefore took his place as the youngest of his grandfather's band of warriors. The jarl thus honoured raised the cup to his lips, and then passed it to his neighbour, who followed his example. But Eric spoke in a low, startled tone to his grandfather: 'Does not this resemble Oscar's band of revenge-seekers? I cannot drink of the cup!'

'Hush, boy!' said Thorganger, in a subdued, but terribly stern voice; 'thou hast provoked me once to-day; beware how thou passest the bounds of my patience. There is a difference, I should hope, between the vowing to spend one's life in seeking revenge, and in one's eagerness often giving the cause thereto oneself, and in punishing an audacious criminal who has dared to invade one's lands and murder one's kindred? Speak not another word, but drink of the cup, or I strike thee dead as an unworthy son of my house.'

Eric obeyed, bewildered, half stunned by Thorganger's violence; he carried the wine to his lips, and that was all. The principal jarls now left the room to prepare for their departure. Thorganger, after a moment's talk with his shield-bearer, followed them. Eric remained leaning in a discontented attitude by the window. In a

short time his grandfather returned, and coming straight up to him, said, sharply :

‘Eric, art thou a fool ? I well-nigh think it. Thou wilt never get thy followers to fight if thou dampest their generous fury at the very commencement. What didst thou mean ?’ And to compare my seeking to punish a foe who hath done me deadly wrong to Oscar’s bloodthirsty revenge-seekers is impudence !

‘But,’ said Eric faintly, recalling some of his early lessons, ‘I thought we were to forgive our foes ?’

‘In reason and justice, yes,’ said Thorganger. ‘When one is struck, to sit still with hands clasped may do very well for thy Christian hermits, who have nought to love : but I tell thee, it will not answer if one is to live at all ; it is like presenting one’s throat to the knife. Let these marauders go unpunished after this their first attempt, and the next thing they will do will be to attack the castle itself ; and thou wilt meekly fold thy hands and say : “I will not seek revenge.” Out upon thy dreams, Eric ! I little thought that the last of my race would give occasion to be said of him that he is a dreamer and a star-gazer. I would slay thee first, with my own hands !’

Eric made no answer ; but the mournful tone in which, in spite of the threat contained in them, these words were pronounced, touched him, and he inwardly resolved that, as far as courage and activity went, his grandfather should have nought to complain of him ; and as Furchen, the merchant whom he consulted on the subject, and in whose grave, calm judgment he had great confidence, was of the same opinion as his grandfather, he was fain to consider, either that he had been mistaken, or that he had

not learnt long enough of John to be instructed in the exceptions there are to be made to every rule. But he had little time for thought, for the preparations for departure were being hurried forward, and in no way did they differ from those of the expeditions he had seen start from Oscar's or, more latterly, from his uncle's castles. There was the same fierce exultation on the part of the warriors—the same desire to die in battle ; nay, he even heard appeals to Odin and Thor in the songs sung by the women while they helped to prepare their husbands' arms and travelling gear ; and the very sword with which Thorganger girded him on the eve of their starting, bore a motto entreating the gods to give him their countenance and support, and only when his grandfather blessed him did Eric again feel that he was in a Christian family. The women assembled to see them off, and there were bright faces and encouraging smiles ; though, before that band returned, many would have to weep a father, a husband, a brother, or a lover.

‘Fare thee well, Eric,’ said Elfleda to her cousin ; ‘mayest thou have good success, and come home a conqueror.’

And as she stood in the midst of her maidens, her cheeks glowing with excitement, and her eyes sparkling, Eric felt as if an angel of light had been present when he started.

CHAPTER XII.

'Fast o'er the moonlit chase they sped,
Well knew the band that measured tread,
When in retreat, or in advance,
The serried warriors move at once ;
And evil were the luck if dawn
Surprised them on the open lawn.
Copses they traverse, brooks they cross,
Strain up the bank, and o'er the moss.'

Lord of the Isles, canto v.

IT was the evening of the second day's march that Eric halted his band in a rocky defile, to consult with the elder jarls if they should encamp there for the night, or whether they should press forward to attack Horslonger under cover of the darkness. All were for halting. A deep morass lay between them and the object of the attack; the men were tired, and there was great chance that morning would find them floundering, perhaps scattered, in the bog, and they would have poor hope against Horslonger's fresh troops, drawn up on the further side to repel their attack.

Only one member of the council gave no opinion, and this was the youth we have before noticed as not agreeing with his companions. Eric turned to him, saying pleasantly : ' And what dost thou think, Harold? Will it be best to push forward, or to rest here till break of day ? '

' I cannot tell,' answered Harold, sullenly. ' I am

here to obey, not to counsel ; I leave that to wiser heads.'

'At least thou mightest be civil when our young chief does thee the favour to consult thee,' said an old jarl, who was remarkable for his devotion to Thor-ganger's family, and to whom, on that account, the old leader had especially recommended the care of his inexperienced grandson.

Harold swallowed this rebuke as best he might, and Sigismund's proposal that they should encamp on the spot where they were meeting with general approbation, measures were at once taken for settling for the night.

In less than an hour all was arranged ; the fires lighted ; the proper number of sentinels placed to prevent a midnight surprise ; and the scouts, who had been sent to the edge of the morass to see if all was still, having returned to say that Horslonger was holding high festival in honour of his victory, Eric felt that there was nothing more to do but to wait for morning.

Too anxious to feel disposed for sleep, he made his way to an elevated terrace above the encampment, where he paced up and down, enjoying the fresh evening air, and thinking over the probable events of the morrow. His heart beat high as he thought of the gallant band he was conducting ; but there was no vanity in his disposition ; his head was not turned, as many another's might have been, by being thus early placed in command ; he had merely that calm, just reliance on his own powers without which nothing can be accomplished.

Suddenly Eric's mantle was pulled from behind ; he looked round and perceived Gobby, a poor half-witted

boy, son to one of the jarls, who had accompanied his father as arrow-carrier, or any other light thing suitable to his size, which was very small though he was fourteen years old. Poor Gobby had but an unhappy life of it; how he managed to grow up at all in that rough age was a marvel. The treatment in his case had been rendered all the rougher, by the dislike and contempt his parents were certain to feel for a son who could do them no credit, and who all his life long would be a burthen on their hands.

Eric had a naturally kind heart, besides he knew what it was to be alone and despised, and it gave him a kind of sympathy with poor Gobby. He had more than once spoken kindly to the lad, who in return had attached himself vehemently to Eric, and was never so happy as when unperceived he could follow the object of his adoration about like a shadow. It must be confessed that Eric, with all his good nature, was anything but pleased to have his musings thus interrupted, and he said a trifle sharply:

‘What dost thou want, Gobby? Go back; this is no place for thee.’

Without noticing this address, Gobby pointed with one finger towards the path by which Eric had ascended from the camp, the then dry bed of a watercourse, uttered the single word ‘Beware!’ and slipping away, glided down the very face of the rock as it seemed, with that astounding steadiness of brain and sureness of foot and eye that are often to be seen in persons who, like him, are afflicted with some mental weakness. They venture where those in full possession of their faculties would never think of going. Yet they

mostly, if not always, arrive safely at the end of their attempt.

Thus strangely warned, Eric looked round him for this unseen danger which Gobby seemed to indicate as threatening him, but could discover nothing. All looked quiet in the camp below; the watch-fires burnt, and he could distinguish the dark forms of the men grouped round them.

'Gobby did not know what he meant,' Eric thought, and resumed his walk. He had not, however, gone many paces when an arrow whistled past him, so close, and the vibration of the air was so strong, that for the moment he thought his cheek was grazed; the arrow, however, lodged harmlessly in the ground a few feet beyond him, and Eric sprang forward and seized his assailant, a man who was crouching behind a rock in the very gully pointed out by Gobby. Either the fellow was stupefied by the suddenness of Eric's attack, or, his arrow failing, he was not immediately prepared with another weapon. He made but a slight defence, and it needed but little strength to overpower and drag him forward to the light, which, though midnight was scarcely past, was already beginning to brighten for the coming day; but when Eric perceived his captive's face, he slackened his grasp, exclaiming: 'Harold! is it thou?'

'Take my life, sir chief,' said Harold, in a dogged tone; 'for I would have taken thine.'

'And wherefore?' demanded Eric, in perfect amazement.

'Thou hast wronged me,' replied Harold; 'but slay me, and have done with it.'

'But why shouldest thou seek to kill me, Harold?' pursued Eric.

'Thou hast taken from me all that life was worth living for,' replied Harold.

Eric considered, then recollecting hearing Sigismund say, once before, when Harold had behaved in the same curt, queer way as he had done to-night: 'Ah! we shall have nice work with thee, I can see; but it matters not, since there is now no chance of thy ruling over us;' and it occurred to Eric that perhaps Harold was feeling resentment for this downfall of his hopes, so he said:

'I am sorry that by me thou hast been disappointed, Harold; yet, I could not help—'

'Dost thou suppose,' interrupted Harold passionately, 'that I care for the leadership of the tribe, which might have been mine if thou hadst not returned? No! it is nought to me; thou art welcome to it.'

'Of what then dost thou complain?' said Eric, still patiently.

'Trouble not thyself about that,' rejoined Harold fiercely, 'but slay me at once, or call up thy jarls to do it for thee.'

'I shall do neither one nor the other,' replied Eric deliberately, 'but I would fain know what I can have done, in so short a time as I have dwelt under my grandfather's roof, to turn one of his most faithful friends into an enemy.'

'Wilt thou then compel me to say it?' asked Harold with the bitterness of despair: 'thou hast taken her from me.'

'*Her!*' repeated Eric, no nearer a solution of the mystery than he was before.

'Must I then pronounce her name?' cried Harold, grasping at the rock against which he was leaning, as if in severe bodily pain—'*Elfleda!*'

There was a deep pause. A new light had broken in upon Eric, and Harold was endeavouring to conquer his paroxysm of either love or anger; at length Eric spoke:

'And does Elfleda return thine affection?'

'Yes.' Harold's voice was smothered.

'Listen to me, Harold,' continued Eric: 'I freely pardon thee for thine offence; I shall never tell of it, so unless thou thyself reveal it, it will remain a secret between us.'

Harold started, as if life was again opening before him.

'I promise——' he began.

'No,' interrupted Eric, 'I will extract no oath from thee; I should never feel sure of thee if I did; a forced promise makes an unwilling friend; thou art free and unfettered to renew thine attempt another time, when thou mayest have better success. But I tell thee this, that I do not mean to wed Elfleda, that I never can, for my heart and my honour are alike pledged elsewhere.'

'Thorganger intends it,' said Harold incredulously; 'and since thy return little else has been spoken of.'

'I know it,' said Eric, 'and I am trusting thee, thus telling thee of the difference between my grandfather and myself. But, before I returned did Thorganger know? Was he likely to approve of such a union?'

'Know of it? approve of it?' repeated Harold; 'he would have been capable of killing me, had he but suspected it.'

'And yet she loves thee?'

'Yes.'

'Then,' said Eric, somewhat sadly, 'we are alike in one respect: we both love, and cannot obtain the object of our affections; but thou art the happier of the two, for thou knowest that thou art loved in return, while I——. But know Harold, that I will not stand between thee and Elfleda; I will rather do my best to forward thy cause should occasion offer. There is but one thing—I regard the leadership of my grandfather's band as a sacred trust, and that it is a solemn duty imposed upon me to keep it as much as in me lies as he would wish it to be; therefore, though I gladly resign to thee whatever claim I may have had upon Elfleda I cannot and will not yield to thee the post of leader.'

'I do not covet it,' said Harold, smiling a little; 'I am not fit for warlike pursuits, I cannot command; I should be but too glad to settle down with Elfleda in peace, and she would be well contented with me if I were but strong enough to defend my home. She wants no great warrior for her husband.'

'So be it then,' said Eric, turning from him. 'The dawn purples in the east; we must get some rest before we march.'

He would have descended the gully when he was stopped by Harold, who, though of a jealous temper, was incapable of any meanness, and Eric's free generosity had softened and won him:

'Listen to me for one moment,' he pleaded, 'while I

say that I am sorry for what I have done. Hadst thou put me to the most torturing death, thou couldest never have made me say that I regretted my conduct; but thou hast restored to me life, honour, love; and in return, I will devote myself to thee, to show that I am not ungrateful.'

'Enough, dear Harold,' said Eric, holding out his hand; 'then we are friends.'

Harold flung himself into his generous rival's arms, and Eric, while warmly returning his affection, expressed his pleasure at having gained it, saying:

'I have never known before, Harold, what it is to have a brother.'

After a little more talk they both descended to the camp, in a very different mood to that in which one at least of them had ascended from it.

Much, however, as they needed rest, they had little time for it, for the sun was scarcely above the horizon before the camp was astir; the men taking their rude morning meal, the chiefs consulting how best to order the attack. The scouts still brought in news that all was quiet, and at length they moved.

When they reached the edge of the morass, Eric felt very thankful that they had not attempted to cross it when they were weary, and in the uncertain evening light; for he saw with how much difficulty they struggled through it, in the bright morning and fresh from their night's rest.

In silence they traversed the bog, and clambered up the steep precipitous rocks that rose before them on the farther side. In silence they arrived before Hors-longer's dwelling, a strongly-fortified wattle building.

There was no sign of life, or of any one stirring ; all were asleep after their long carouse. In silence the warriors filed into the courtyard ; it was the ominous calm before the tempest. There was a moment's pause, a few whispered words between Eric and Sigismund, and the latter with half the band remained to guard the rear, while the former, with Harold and the other half of the troop, made his way to the great hall. Then there was silence no longer, but loud cries and a confused noise as the warriors fought madly in the confined space.

For some time it seemed doubtful which would be successful, for though Horslonger's band had been taken by surprise, and were many of them overcome with wine, they still more than twice outnumbered their bold assailants, and it appeared at one time as if these must have been driven back ; and Sigismund could not come to their aid, for he had his hands full, with those who on the first alarm of danger had rushed out from the other parts of the building. But Eric pressed on bravely, keeping up the spirits of his followers by his own unflinching valour, until at last he found himself engaged hand to hand with Horslonger, a giant of full seven feet high.

Horslonger had taken his part in the conviviality of the preceding evening ; but like a true Northman, he was very far indeed from being rendered helpless by his excess. When first, perhaps, he rose from his uneasy sleep, his cheek was flushed and his eye unsteady ; but fighting was to him like his natural element, and when he had struck a few blows, wounded a few adversaries, he was himself again. There he stood, wielding his

immense axe, clearing for himself a wide circle, for few cared to come within the sway of that tremendous arm. When he saw himself attacked by so young a champion, he exclaimed scornfully :

‘Where is Thorganger ? Why comes he not to the fight ? Why sends he as his representative a boy, with colouring as delicate as a maiden’s ? Get thee home, lad ; wait till thy arm be stronger ; I scorn to take thy life.’

‘Thou shalt find, proud man,’ replied Eric, pressing on him, ‘that, though young, I am of the race of Thorganger !’

‘Wilt have it, then ?’ said Horslonger. ‘It pities me for thee ; such courage deserved a better fate.’

But it was not so easy as Horslonger had imagined to strike his rash adversary to the ground. Eric was exceedingly light in all his movements, and possessed of a quick, true eye, and skilfully he avoided the ponderous blows of the giant, one of which would have been sufficient to fell him never to rise again, and Horslonger found himself losing breath, without being able to gain any real advantage. Several of his followers would have come to his aid, but Harold, who, fired by the desire of showing his gratitude to his benefactor, seemed this day to have put on a new character, was ever on the look-out, with skilfully-aimed blow or thrust, to save Eric from any side attack. Still, however, the fate of the combat hung in the balance, when suddenly the cry of ‘Thorganger to the rescue ! Remember !’ uttered with all the fury of old Sigismund’s lungs who, having disposed of his own enemies in the courtyard, now rushed to his chief’s assistance, seemed to put

fresh vigour into his arm, and to revive his flagging spirit. He made one bold and successful thrust at Horslonger, whom he caught with a mortal wound in the chest. The giant tottered and fell ; but in his fall he dragged down Eric, and victor and vanquished rolled together.

Victory now declared itself for the attackers ; for while Eric's place was very ably supplied by Harold and Sigismund, Horslonger had neither brother nor relation fit to take the part vacated by his fall. Therefore, before very long, the defenders were either struck down or made prisoners, and Sigismund and his party stood triumphant.

'Where,' cried the hoary leader, 'are our captive friends ?' and compelling one of the prisoners to act as guide, he rushed from the hall in search of those whose imprisonment had been the cause of the expedition.

'Eric ! where is Eric ?' exclaimed Harold, and hastened to the spot where he had seen his friend fall. But now that the excitement which had held him up was over, his constitutional timidity returned, and he shrank back from the grim, upturned face of the dead sea-king, as if he feared that when he moved him the grisly warrior would awaken. He looked round for aid, but he was alone ; all had left the hall, either in search of plunder, or to subdue any enemies that might still be lurking in the recesses of the building, or in charge of the prisoners, whom they were collecting in the courtyard. If Eric was to be saved, Harold must do it himself. Shuddering a little, he bent over the body and moved it on one side —no easy matter. When, however, he had succeeded, and carried Eric to the door that he might get fresh air,

he was rewarded by seeing that his friend and leader still breathed. But how to restore him to consciousness? Harold looked round despairingly for help, when it arrived in a totally unexpected form.

Poor Gobby, who had followed his father into the courtyard, and when the fight began shrank behind a corner to escape as much as possible from the fray, now came out, and, looking timidly round, crept towards the hall; but when he caught sight of Eric's prostrate figure, he sprang forward, sobbing:

'Is he dead? is he dead?'

'Get some water,' cried Harold, too thankful at seeing a chance of help to remember that the poor simpleton was no friend of his, and that at the sound of his voice he was far more likely to fly than to attempt to fulfil the commission.

But what Gobby would not have done for any other person on earth, he did for Eric; and seizing one of the pitchers left from last night's revel, he hurried into the courtyard, and soon returned with it full of clear, cold water, with which they plentifully deluged Eric's face and chest. He sighed heavily, opened his eyes but for one moment, then closed them again, thereby calling forth renewed sobs from Gobby, and making Harold despair as to what he could do to restore him.

But at this instant Sigismund, having taken due measures for securing the castle and having released their captive friends, returned to the hall to look for Eric, of whose fall in the moment of victory he was yet ignorant. His appearance and authority quickly recalled all the stragglers, who proceeded to carry away their wounded and to make preparation for their departure,

while Sigismund and several of the principal jarls devoted themselves to the task of restoring their young leader. This, however, was no easy matter; for though they bathed his face with water, though they repeated all manner of charms to bring him round, all was unsuccessful; he lay pale and still as death.

'It is of no good,' said Sigismund at last; 'we can do nought for him. Happy for him to have died in battle; but the woe remains for us.'

'He is no more dead than thou or I,' said a voice beside them.

They started round. Standing a little behind them was a woman, no longer in the first bloom of youth, but still most strikingly handsome. Her hair, black as a raven's wing, hung like a thick veil over her shoulders, and any damage that time might have done to the freshness of her complexion was fully compensated by her large, brilliant, dark eyes. It was a face, once seen, never to be forgotten; but there was that in it best described by the Scotch word 'uncanny.'

'He is no more dead than thou or I,' she repeated confidently; and taking advantage of the surprise caused by her sudden appearance, she advanced, and raised Eric's head upon her shoulder.

'And who art thou?' asked Sigismund, rallying.

'Varenga, the wife of Horslonger.'

'And dost thou think we will let thee come near our young chief?' cried Sigismund, stepping towards her with uplifted weapon.

'Stand back!' said Varenga, haughtily. 'Think ye that if I desired vengeance for his death, I should not have stood by and watched you kill your leader by slow

degrees, as ye were on the fair road to do, drowning him in this way ? The desire for vengeance is better gratified by seeing the enemy die in torments, even when inflicted by another's hand, than by granting him a speedy death by plunging a dagger to his heart. But no ; he has done me the greatest service that man could —he has freed me from my tyrant, and I honour him for it.'

There was a ring of truth in her voice, and the madness that mingled with her accents insensibly awed her hearers, and they drew back a few paces.

And now they heard strange talk from their captives in the court, who, having no personal feud with their conquerors, whom they regarded in the light of deliverers from the hated yoke of Horslonger, were fraternising with them, and preparing to accompany them home to enlist under the banner of the victorious Thorganger. They told the strangers how that Varenga was a witch; how that Horslonger had brought her captive from one of his expeditions to the far south; of the sway that she exercised over the mind of her husband, who, nevertheless, at times treated her with brutal cruelty; how that she had been strongly against this expedition, but that how, when it had succeeded, she had joined in the feasting, and amongst those present the wildest—no doubt, they now thought, that she might the better consummate her revenge on Horslonger.

As they listened to these tales, the followers of Thorganger trembled. One thing was certain, Eric must be rescued from her hands. Then why not fire the castle over her head ? ‘Ay, burn her ! burn her to death !’ cried their late enemies. This scheme, however, had one

slight difficulty in the way of its execution ; not one of the doughty warriors cared to approach her ; for, as those who knew her declared, she had been seen to assume a giant's shape and form : there was no knowing what might happen to the bold adventurer. At last, Harold said that he would willingly run the risk for the sake of saving his friend ; and, followed at a distance by his encouraging comrades, he boldly entered, and approached Varenga, who was still engaged in her care of Eric.

'I have come to demand that thou give us up our leader,' he said.

'Hast thou?' said Varenga, raising her eyes ; 'then, take that!' and she struck him a slight blow in the centre of the forehead with a long reed that hung at her girdle.

Harold fled. He declared that the place touched burned like fire ; his companions, that they had seen the sparks fly.

'Ha!' cried the witch-queen, in ringing accents ; 'so ye will take your leader from my care, will ye? Ye will fire the castle over my head, and let me burn, together with all that is in it? Ye had better beware how ye do that, for despair begets despair!'

The confederates were dumbfounded by these words. They had not considered it might be possible that Varenga was not too much occupied in her attention to the wounded youth to be able to hear their conversation, which they had carried on without lowering their voices. They instantly put this quickness of hearing down to the charms she wore, and drew back in terror ; when, lifting Eric as lightly as though he had been a child,

she carried him out into the open air. Perhaps his followers were more satisfied that, for him at least, the witch-queen's spells were beneficial, when they saw him open his eyes and look round.

'Where am I?' he asked feebly.

'Safe!' replied Varenga; and his eyes closed again.

'What wilt thou,' said Sigismund, in a more respectful tone, 'be done with thy husband's body?'

'Burn it, with the castle,' said Varenga; 'fit enough grave for such as he.' And she resumed her attentions to Eric.

The notion of setting fire to the building was eagerly caught; and, having removed their wounded and the plunder, they put a light to it in several places, its late defenders being among the most active of the destroyers. They then formed their line of march, and hastened to descend the hill, to be out of the way of the burning castle.

The foray had been successful; they had obtained vengeance, and destroyed the powers of their adversary; they had released their friends, and all with but little loss to themselves. Of plunder there was not much, for Horslonger's recent expeditions, except this latest, had been unprofitable. But this one was, perhaps, made up by the score or more of brave fellows they had won to join their band. There were no prisoners except Varenga, and of her they would gladly have been quit, but that any attack upon her would, they believed, cost the life of their young leader, by whose side she constantly kept, and who, as he was unable to defend himself, was wholly in her power. There was, therefore, nothing for it but to take her back, and let Thorganger decide her fate; and happy indeed would they be if on the road

she caused them no great misfortune by her witcheries. They guarded and watched her closely, however, at a respectful distance, for there was not one who would venture close to her, except the two men who perforce were carrying the deerskin upon which Eric was extended. Thus, no one held communication with her but poor Gobby, who, though perhaps he had not sense enough to understand the danger he was running in addressing her, knew that it was his friend and benefactor who lay there, senseless and pale, and he hovered near, ready to offer any little service the moment occasion should offer, and it was to him alone that Varenga deigned to speak. When she heard him sobbing as they moved along, she looked up, and said in a voice sweet through all its wildness :

‘Tush ! boy ; he is not dead ; he will soon be well again.’

When the party reached the marsh, they turned to cast a look at the burning castle, which rose like a pyramid of flames to the sky, which it illumined for many a mile, and even at this distance they distinctly heard the roar of the flames, mingled from time to time with a sharp crackling sound, as a fresh part of the dry, wooden building caught.

‘I wonder,’ said Varenga, with a grim smile, as the latter sound reached her ears, ‘if that is the crackling of his bones as they consume in the fiery glow. Burn on !’ she cried wildly, waving her arms in the direction of the castle. ‘Burn on ! thou accursed home of an accursed race, till nothing be left of thee but a heap of black ashes. Too long hast thou cumbered the ground.’

And all shrank from her with horror ; and she walked

along, with flushed cheeks ; her lips moved, but no sound issued from them.

In this way they marched until they reached the place of their yesterday's encampment, where they again took up their quarters for the night. There was neither feasting nor merriment among them, for Thorganger had brought his men to a state of discipline very rare at that epoch, and they willingly heeded Sigismund when he told them that they must reserve their joy until they reached home, as they were still in the midst of their foes, who, attracted by the blazing pile, might fall upon them at any moment, and that it was absolutely necessary that they should preserve order and sobriety. Thus, their camp that night presented the unusual spectacle of a band of Northmen returned from a successful enterprise, who yet laid themselves down as quietly as if they still had the work before them, as if the battle were still to be fought.

CHAPTER XIII.

' And home returning, filled the hall
With revel, wassail-rout, and brawl.'
Marmion, canto iii., intro.

IT was the eighth day after the departure of Eric and his gallant band for the punishment of Horslonger, that, towards evening, Thorganger was slowly pacing one of the terraces immediately below his dwelling. There was an expression of anxiety upon his face, for more hung on the fate of this expedition than Eric or any of

those concerned in it guessed. Thorganger felt that if his grandson returned, not only successful, but also with the credit of the victory in a particular manner belonging to his own conduct and courage, there would be no reason for pushing his marriage with Elfleda, as he would become sufficiently popular to bear down all other candidates. If however, on the other hand, they had been repulsed, or if the triumph were in a great measure due to another, Thorganger felt that there would be no help but in Eric's immediately espousing his cousin, as in that case his title would need all the support it could receive from such a connection. But Thorganger looked forward with anxiety to this emergency ; he felt that he was unable to cope with Eric ; that there was that in the young man's calm decision, unmoved alike by promises or threats, which it was impossible for him to bend. 'And yet,' he thought, 'I cannot tell why he should refuse to wed Elfleda ; she is surely fairer than the savage damsel to whom he has given his heart, and who, to all accounts, is far fitter to be a youth than a maiden ;' and he looked with affectionate criticism at his granddaughter, who was standing at the farther end of the terrace, with her eyes bent on the ground, while her beautiful features wore a pensive, almost sad, expression. He approached her :

'What art thou thinking of, Elfleda ?' he asked.

She raised her eyes with a start. 'That it is a long time since Eric and the rest set out,' she answered.

'True,' said Thorganger, regarding her keenly ; 'but they were obliged to move with caution, for fear of a surprise. We could scarce have seen them back before to-night.'

'Was it necessary,' pursued Elfleda, 'that all should go? It was such a number of leaders for such a small band.'

'I wished to give thy cousin all the advice he could have,' replied Thorganger. 'Thou wouldest not surely have deprived him of Sigismund, or any of those sage counsellors?'

'No,' answered Elfleda, quickly; 'not any of the old, who could help him; but so many of the young have gone, who could not advise him. Was it wise to risk them all? Should anything happen to them and my cousin, thy house and band would be left without prop or leader.'

Such a question from any one else would have made Thorganger very angry; but Elfleda was a privileged person, so he only smiled as he answered: 'So thou thinkest that, dost thou? I would I knew who are favoured by thee, whom thou wouldest keep at home safe from peril. I fear me they would not thank thee, for "without danger, without glory," says the proverb.'

Elfleda's blushes at this speech were so vivid that her grandfather could not have failed to remark them, if his eye had not been caught at this moment by a dark, moving mass, half a mile off, on the farther side of the river. 'Surely that must be our band!' he exclaimed, shading his eyes from the sun, as he gazed in the direction of the mass. 'Elfleda, thine eyes are better than mine; dost see our ravens and eagles?'

'I do!' she cried, her cheeks flushing with excitement. 'Ah! now,' she added, 'they draw nearer; I can see Sigismund's tall figure leading them; but I see not Eric nor Harold; and lo! they carry long, dark things in the

rear ; they must be the wounded—or the dead !' she concluded, turning very white.

'Tush, girl !' said Thorganger ; 'how canst thou ever be the wife of a sea-king, if thou growest pale for nought ? But see ! there comes a messenger, to tell us how they have sped.'

And Thorganger moved to meet a man, who, sent by Sigismund to tell the state of affairs with them, was now climbing the height. As Thorganger thus awaited the good or bad news that was coming, it was with difficulty that he maintained that appearance of indifference that custom required of him on such an occasion. At a little distance behind him stood Elfleda, pale as death, leaning against the rock for support, and seemingly finding it a hard matter to restrain herself from rushing forward to meet the messenger ; but as the women, at the first mention of approaching news, crowded on to the terrace, where they stood in eager groups, she closely drew her veil round her face, as if she did not wish her expression to be seen.

And now the messenger had reached the summit ; in another moment he was by Thorganger's side, and panting from the long run and steep climb, he could at first say no more than : 'Victory ! glorious victory ! Horslonger is slain.'

Thorganger was a Christian, but there remained much of the spirit of the old heathen, as was seen from his glance of fierce exultation as he heard of his enemy's death ; he did not aloud praise Thor for having given him the victory, but he raised his eyes to heaven. Then he said :

'At what price have we paid for this victory? Whom have we to mourn, and yet to rejoice over?'

'Few, very few,' replied the messenger, 'the victory is most complete; for, not only is Horslonger dead, and his castle destroyed, but the remnant of his band are coming, not as prisoners, but as comrades, to swear obedience to thee.'

A close observer only could have noted how Thorganger clasped his hands; how he pressed his lips together, as if scarce daring to allow the words to escape as he asked the next question:

'My grandson Eric, is he safe and well?'

'Safe, but not well,' replied the messenger; 'for he is dangerously wounded.'

'And Sigismund?'

'Well; and so are the rest of the principal jarls.'

Thorganger passed his hand across his brow, as if to dissipate a shade; then he said:

'Thanks for thy brave tidings; let them prepare high feasting for our gallant warriors. And, good fellow,' he added, presenting him with a silver bracelet that he had worn on his own arm, 'take that as thy due meed for having been the first to bring us such good news. I go to meet the victors at the landing-place.'

He descended the hill; the messenger looked at the bracelet that he held in his hand, then after the retreating form of his leader with somewhat of disappointment.

'I would,' he said, 'that he had rewarded me less, and looked more joyful over it.'

'He thinks of his grandson,' said one and another.

'Remember that the young Eric is the only prop of his house.'

'And a gallant prop, too, I can tell ye,' said the messenger; 'it was he who struck down Horslonger, he led the fight; he united all the spirit and bravery of the young with the wisdom of the old. He is a worthy descendant of the old sea-kings.'

Eric's name rang out again and again, as those who had been left behind shouted their praise of their returning friends, and those on the other side of the river took up the cry, till the rocks sounded again. At last one suggested, that unless they at once began their preparations, they were not likely to have the feast ready for their brave victors, which their lord had commanded.

A tumult was raging in Elfeda's breast; some were wounded besides Eric she knew; but who? The messenger had said that the principal jarls were safe; did that title include Harold? She feared not; she could not distinguish his form among the now rapidly advancing band. Was he killed? or was he only wounded? Certainty, even of the worst, would have been relief. Twice she was on the point of stepping forward and boldly asking the messenger if Harold were safe, and each time the thought checked her: it would be considered strange for her to ask after the welfare of a young jarl, she whom report already pointed out as the future bride of the hero of the day, Eric. But why should she care? Harold had been her playfellow from childhood; surely there could be no harm in her inquiring concerning him. She looked up resolved to put the question; she found herself alone; the fates seemed

against her. She again concealed her face ; but now the tramp of the approaching warriors told her that the victors would be here anon ; she could not await them on the terrace, and she fled—fled to her own apartment, where she sank down upon the ground, burying her face in her hands, and endeavouring to shut out all sound and all thought.

She passionately loved one man, and she knew that her grandfather intended her to marry another ; she had agreed when he had proposed it to her, and she was too much of a coward to tell her lover that their union was impossible, and allowed him to go on, hoping and believing her still true to him ; and she hated herself for her cowardice and duplicity. Poor Elfleda !

In the meantime Thorganger was pursuing his way to the landing-place with an anxious heart ; victory would be dearly purchased if the price of each successful foray was to be the life of a promising young member of his house.

The first boat was disembarking when he reached the shore, and Sigismund was the first person he greeted :

‘ Welcome, Sigismund ! welcome home, my old friend and companion, after thy glorious conflict ! Where is Eric, my grandson ? ’

‘ He follows,’ answered Sigismund. ‘ He is, indeed, one to be proud of ; he smote down Horslonger ; it is to his hand that we owe the victory.’

‘ Heaven be praised ! ’ said Thorganger. ‘ He is not dangerously wounded ? ’

‘ I cannot tell,’ replied Sigismund, dejectedly.

'Thou canst not tell? Ye have brought him home with you surely?' cried Thorganger.

'Yes, but he is under a spell; Varenga, the witch, the wife of Horslonger, has taken possession of him; and though she comes along with him in our train, she will allow no one to approach him.'

'How came ye,' exclaimed Thorganger, frowning, 'to permit her to come near him? She might murder him on the spot, out of revenge for the death of her husband.'

'We had no choice,' declared Sigismund; 'she had him before we could so much as strike a blow to defend him; and she uses weapons burning as fire against all who approach to take him from her, as Harold can witness, who made the endeavour, backed up by us all; so we thought it for Eric's safety to bring him home with her, and to let you decide what is to be done.'

Thorganger clenched his teeth:

'I could believe such a story invented by Harold to shield his cowardice,' he said, 'but I had not expected that thou, Sigismund, wouldest have given way to it. But I will see and speak with her myself.'

It chanced that Harold was springing on the shore at the moment of Thorganger's last speech; at the contemptuous mention of himself, his cheek flushed, and he shook his fist, as he muttered:

'Some day, thou mayest learn a different story; proud chief.'

The next boat contained Eric, and Varenga, closely wrapped in her veil. As his grandson was lifted on shore, still either asleep or unconscious, Thorganger

stepped forward, and addressing the prisoner courteously, but in the tone of one who has a right to command, he thanked her for her care of Eric, and requested her to accompany some men, to whom he pointed, and who would attend her to the castle—‘Where,’ he said, ‘thou wilt be treated with all honour until arrangement can be made for ransoming or exchanging thee.’

‘I will do nothing of the kind,’ said Varenga, firmly planting herself beside Eric; ‘I will finish the work I have begun here, and complete his cure. Ye would soon murder him among you, were I to leave him to ye.’

‘Woman!’ said Thorganger; ‘dost thou parley with me? Away with thee, or I will force thee to go!'

‘Wilt thou?’ said Varenga. ‘We will see.’

And with one of her lightning-like movements, she passed round to the other side of Eric, and drawing a dagger from some hidden receptacle, she presented it at the breast of the unconscious youth:

‘There is something to be done, before ye carry me by force anywhere,’ she repeated.

‘Disarm her!’ cried Thorganger, almost beside himself.

‘Yes, “disarm her!”’ said Varenga, with mocking accent, that rang far and wide. ‘Approach but one step, and this dagger is plunged into the heart of your young chief. I strike surely; no second blow is needed with me. Kill her, say ye? Yes, but Eric precedes me to join the shades of my ancestors. And he who attempts to slay me may chance to accompany us, for

my hair will circle round his neck, ever tighter and tighter, till it strangles him !

She tore off her veil, and as her hair fell over her shoulders, it looked indeed like so many coils of black snakes. All shrank back; none would obey their leader's command, who was reduced to parleying again.

'Be not unreasonable,' he said; 'I mean thee no harm; but thou canst not think we would leave our youth under the care of his enemy——'

'Of his best friend?' interrupted Varenga. 'He freed me from my tyrant, and for that I would save his life. Thou knowest not the heart of woman, sir chief, if thou imaginest otherwise than that I am grateful to him.'

'And couldest thou cure him?' asked Thorganger.

'Could I?' repeated Varenga. 'Ay! that I could! Ask any of thy followers, and they will tell thee (if they be not liars or fools) that he is better for my care. Left to them, he would ere now have been food for the raven and the kite. Thy part is to kill, sir chief; mine is to cure. If we undertake each other's work we shall do but harm, though maybe I could kill better than thou canst cure!'

'And *wilt* thou cure him?' asked Thorganger doubtfully.

'That I will,' she replied.

Thorganger, in perplexity, spoke apart with Sigismund. It was manifest that any attempt to release Eric from the witch-queen would only end in their obtaining possession of a corpse; and both Sigismund and all the principal jarls were ready to affirm that when Eric did awake from his long slumbers, he was each

time more fully himself than he had been before, though, at the same time, his sleeping so long and so soundly was a sufficient proof that he was under a charm.

Thorganger at length resolved to submit to necessity, and to put the best face upon the matter; he thus again addressed Varenga :

‘ Since, then, thou hast promised to do thy best for Eric, and since so far he hath flourished under thy care, we are willing to permit thee to tend him, so long as thou dost well by him; but if thou failest to keep thy word—if, instead of curing him, thou killest him, dreadful shall be thy punishment: I will burn thee or tear thee with wild horses.’

Thorganger’s vexation at having thus publicly to own that he was beaten in the same manner as his followers, whom he had ridiculed for their defeat, probably added strength to his terrible denunciations of vengeance, which, however, Varenga received with great coolness.

‘ I accept thy word,’ she said, replacing her dagger in her girdle. ‘ Thou tellest me what I shall have if I fail to do my work, but not one syllable hast thou spoken of the *reward* thou wilt give me when I restore thy grandson to thee safe and well ?’

‘ Gold and jewels,’ began Thorganger hastily ; ‘ all that woman’s heart can delight in——’

‘ Is that all ?’ interrupted Varenga. ‘ I want them not. He himself has already paid me sufficiently by slaying my tyrant; I owe thee nothing, thou me nothing. Move on !’ she added imperiously to Eric’s bearers ; ‘ the youth has been long enough exposed to the air ; he must be taken under shelter.’

Trembling, the men obeyed her, and carried Eric up

the hill, while she walked beside him with a steady step, ever ready to lay a soothing hand upon her patient when an unskilful jolt caused him to moan. Thorganger, with a very discontented expression, followed close behind.

At the castle gates they were met by the joyous band of welcomers, who, however, drew back with awe-struck faces when they saw the gloom upon their lord's brow, and the pale, stern features of the witch-queen. They entered and stood in the hall, while two of the bearers hastened to prepare the couch, to which Varenga insisted her patient should be immediately conveyed.

Thus Thorganger and the two other bearers were left alone with Varenga, for all the friends of the newly-arrived had rushed away to meet them, and their joyous shouts could now be heard echoing far along the valley.

There was something uncomfortable in the dark, silent hall, with the immovable figure of the witch-queen standing beside the inanimate form of what might not unaptly be termed her victim. Thorganger felt its influence, and looked round for something to divert it.

'Where is Elfleda? Where is my granddaughter?' he asked. Receiving no answer, he went to the foot of the steep winding stairs, and called repeatedly, 'Elfleda! Where art thou, Elfleda?' There was no reply. At last, losing all patience, he shouted angrily, 'Elfleda! if thou art here, I command thee to answer me!'

'I am here,' said a voice; and Elfleda, trembling violently and deadly pale, made her appearance.

'Why dost thou hide thyself thus?' asked her grandfather impatiently.

'Are they safe?' breathed Elfleda.

‘Eric?’ said Thorganger. ‘Yes, he is here. But come down; thou art little better than a fool.’

Elfleda followed, trembling still at his unwonted harshness. And yet Thorganger was very far from meaning to be unkind to her; but, like the master of many a modern family who has been thoroughly put out, he wreaked his wrath on the first unresisting person who came in his way, without considering whether she deserved it or not.

On reaching the hall, Thorganger, anxious, if possible, to soothe his contumacious prisoner, introduced her to Elfleda.

‘Elfleda, this is Varenga, the wife of Horslonger, who has been doing thy work of tending thy cousin.’

Elfleda would have advanced to her, but Varenga turned on her her snake-like eye, and as she met it, Elfleda shuddered and drew back.

‘I cannot,’ she whispered; ‘I cannot go near her.’

‘Tush, girl!’ said Thorganger, however also in a subdued voice; ‘she will do thee no harm, though she is a witch. She hath possessed herself of thy cousin’s person, and we must soothe her, and do our best to keep her in a good temper until chance shall give us an opportunity of releasing Eric from her, or a priest comes this way who can exorcise her.’

Could Varenga have heard this speech, she might have set her mind at rest as to the length of time she would be permitted to attend Eric, a priest being a very rare visitor indeed at Thorganger’s castle, where, though the lord himself and several of his jarls were Christians, the greatest number of his followers adhered to the religion of their forefathers, and regarded Thorganger’s

Christianity, if not with that bitter anger that would have existed had he been of lower rank or less distinguished character, still with a degree of contemptuous indifference, that showed they were very far from being ready or willing to follow his example.

Whether her grandfather's speech, related above, was calculated or not to relieve Elfeda's fears we think to be, at the least, doubtful; but at that moment she received a more powerful encouragement in the person of Harold, who entered, thus relieving her mind as to his safety, for he was looking hale and well; and by going up to Varenga and asking her how her patient fared, he removed some, at any rate, of her nervousness; for when she saw that he was neither struck dead on the spot, nor changed to any hideous beast, but that, on the contrary, Varenga answered him with every appearance of amiability, she came to the conclusion that what was safe for Harold was likely also to prove safe for herself. She accordingly summoned up her courage, and, approaching, asked Varenga if there was any way in which she could serve her.

'No,' replied Varenga, not deigning to raise her eyes; 'at least, unless thou canst hurry those lazy knaves who have gone to prepare a chamber for this youth; he will be killed by the noise of those people outside.'

Fortunately Eric was saved from this fate by the entrance at this instant of the men sent by Thorganger to clear out a room for his grandson, followed by an old hag who was in the habit of tending all the sick and wounded in the family, and who was very irate at the notion of her office being taken from her, and demanded

that young Eric should instantly be resigned to her care.

'Peace, woman!' said the much-tormented Thor-ganger. 'Varenga and Elfleda will tend him.'

'*Varenga will!*' said that personage, with a clear, decided voice.

Elfleda saw her grandfather's brows bending, and preferring the unknown danger as to what the witch *might* do if she were opposed, to the known one of what Thor-ganger was certain to do if he were in a passion, she spoke, though with somewhat trembling accents:

'But surely, good friend, thou wilt allow me to assist thee?'

Varenga regarded her with an expression akin to contempt.

'Attend thou to those who are unhurt and unwounded,' she said; 'receive them with joy and triumph —*that* were more in thy line than nursing this wounded youth.'

Elfleda blushed scarlet. Was it possible that her feelings were so apparent as this?

If Varenga had spoken at random, she quickly perceived her advantage, and availed herself of it.

'Said I not justly? Go, deck thy locks to greet the victors. And thou,' she continued to the hereditary nurse, 'go thou and look after the other wounded who are being brought up; there are enough for thee to exercise thy skill upon. But if I can prevent it, thou shalt not give *his* bones to be picked by the ravens;' and once more triumphant over every force that opposed her, Varenga swept out of the hall in attendance upon Eric, who, by his grandfather's orders, was carried to a

tiny cell-like room next the council-chamber, where Thorganger determined a close watch should be kept upon the witch and her doings.

It was easier, however, to settle that this should be done than to find any one to do it. Not one of the warriors, for love or shame, would undertake the duty, until at last, to the surprise of everybody, Harold offered. He said that he feared not her spells, and if harm happened to Eric he would share it; so he mounted guard day and night in Eric's chamber, only taking rest at those hours at which Varenga went for a turn on the stone terrace, where, as there was no chance of doing harm to anything or anybody, she was allowed to roam unmolested; but as time passed away, it appeared that her intentions were not bad, for Eric recovered more rapidly than he would have done under any other care. Varenga remained a sort of prisoner at large, but apparently without any wish to change her condition; had she desired to do so, nothing would have been easier, for Thorganger had given strict orders that no attempt should be made to prevent her escape; but she perversely preferred remaining under the roof where she was so unwelcome a visitor.

There was no renewal of the proposal of uniting Eric and Elfeda. Eric had won for himself so much esteem and fame by the expedition against Horslonger, that Thorganger saw that, for the present at least, he did not need any adventitious support to his title. The wily old chief did not, however, despair of in the end obtaining his desire.

In the meantime, the friendship between Eric and Harold increased; the poetic element in both charac-

ters made them congenial companions, and now that jealousy of him was removed, Harold was ready to admire in Eric those qualities of energy and daring which he knew he lacked.

Eric being thus safely conducted through his recent dangers, and happily resting among his friends and relatives, we propose leaving him for awhile, to return to the fortunes of another acquaintance, whom for some time we seem completely to have forgotten—Rhunelda, the daughter of Oscar, the sea-king.

CHAPTER XIV.

'Around their prows the ocean roars,
And chafes beneath their thousand oars,
Yet bears them on their way.
So fumes the war-horse in his might,
That fieldward bears some gallant knight,
Champs till both bit and boss are white,
But, foaming, must obey.'

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

THE sun was sinking like a ball of fire in the west ; the sky above was a deep crimson, reflected in the rippling waves below, then softening through shades of orange and gold into the palest lemon, and again far away in the east, where sea and sky seemed to join to the cool grey.

There were two boats in the midst of the wide expanse of water ; but one glance would have been sufficient to tell the spectator that they were no peaceful merchant vessels, no craft belonging to the hardy,

industrious fisherman, but ships of war. They were high, and beaked, and at their mast-head they bore the dreaded black raven ; over the sides hung shields ; and warriors moved backwards and forwards, eagerly seeking some sign of approaching land ; but in every direction was the waste of waters. Another night must pass before they could reach the desired haven, where they might establish themselves to make their plundering expeditions into the country.

On the deck of one of the vessels sat Rhunelda, her head resting on her hand, and gazing at the setting sun. There was an expression of anxiety on her face ; she was learning the truth of what Eric had told her, that a woman would find it very hard to rule these rough warriors. It was not that at present there was rebellion or open discontent, but she saw enough to be aware that should anything happen to her, should her weaker frame be unable to bear the amount of fatigue theirs could, her power would be gone ; and then, what would become of her ? She had too high and proud a spirit to think of seeking help by marrying, and too little cunning policy in her nature to make her, like a far greater female ruler of more modern times, by giving no decided answer, keep all in suspense, to play off her suitors one against another. Was it, therefore, a wonder that Rhunelda's eye was anxious and sad, or that she should clasp her hands in an intense fit of suffering, of which the single word 'father,' uttered below her breath, gave the explanation ? Yes, Rhunelda mourned her father. She had imbibed enough of John's teaching to make her doubt, in her calmer, some perhaps might say her less fantastical and more reasonable moments, that he was in

safety and honour in the halls of Valhalla. If he was not, where was he ? She turned aside from the thought with a shudder. This struggling between two creeds ; this doubting of the old, without yet having any firm base on which to rest the new, if it produced no other effect in her, at least caused her to long ardently for her father. Suddenly her eye was caught by the exceedingly bright path made by the last rays of the sun on the ocean, through which her bark was passing ; she gazed, her manner softened, tears rushed into her eyes, for, little though it might have been guessed from her stern, cruel, every-day life, Rhunelda's character had also its tender, poetic side ; the calm beauty of the scene insensibly soothed her.

She was roused from her meditation by some one pronouncing her name. She looked up, and perceived standing near her a grizzled warrior. He was one of those who impatiently submitted to a woman, and who, though not actually rebellious, lost no opportunity of depreciating his young leader, instead of helping her. He now addressed her, in harsh accents :

‘ And when, Rhunelda, dost thou think we shall reach the land ? It is now the ninth day since we set out, and there is still no sign of the country to which thou promisedst to lead us ? ’

‘ We shall reach it,’ replied Rhunelda, in a voice that she had difficulty to render not desponding, ‘ when the gods please to waft us there, which I trust will be soon.’

‘ Had it not been better,’ suggested her companion, ‘ if thou hadst turned back when we counselled it, two days ago ? Thou wouldst go on then, and, see, we have no success, and the provisions are falling short ? ’

'Having suffered so much, and come so far,' said Rhunelda, 'would ye faintly turn back, and thus lose, not only all the trouble and danger of this present expedition, but also all the glory of the former ones ? Ye chose me to lead you, ye promised to follow me. If I have badly fulfilled my trust ; if ye have just cause to complain of me, fling me into the sea, and choose ye another leader !'

The old warrior looked as if this advice were by no means uncongenial to him. Rhunelda continued : 'But if, as I hope, there are still some faithful hearts among ye, who, for the love they bore my father, will follow his daughter, let them come with me in this ship, and ye may return home with the other ; but, joined to the disgrace of having failed, ye will carry branded on your brows the word cowards !'

A murmur of disapproval ran through the warriors, who had collected round. Rhunelda saw her advantage, and pursued : 'Ye will not do this ? Cast me into the waves. I will make no resistance ; but while I stand here ye obey me !'

The old warrior saw that this was going too far. To do him justice, he had no desire to depose Rhunelda, unless there was some real advantage to be gained by it ; and he perceived that the warriors, even were they inclined to throw off the yoke of their female commander, would never choose some competent person (such as himself) to fill her place, and that, therefore, her rule was better than none ; so he submitted with all sincerity for the present, and, in a more humble tone than he had used before, he asked her if she would fix some date for their arriving at the desired land ?

'To-morrow night—before to-morrow night,' answered Rhunelda, firmly.

This satisfied every one for the present, and they separated to their occupations or amusements.

The next day passed slowly away; the sun rose, reached the noon tide point, and then sank gradually towards the west. Rhunelda stood on the prow, gazing westward. On the events of this night depended her authority, her very existence. Her heart throbbed as she watched the light on the horizon, and it was well for her that no one was near to witness her anxiety. Suddenly she caught sight of something on the sea-level. What was it? a bank of clouds? Surely it looked too substantial for that. A voice sounded in her ear:

'Where is the land that thou promisedst us, daughter of Oscar? The day is nearly gone, the sun stoops to the west. Where is the land?'

Beside her stood the grisly warrior. In answer, she pointed to the long grey line.

'I see nought but cloud,' he said; 'but, doubtless, thine eyes are better than mine.'

'Wait!' said Rhunelda.

They stood there: the aged warrior, with his hard, incredulous face; the eager girl, with one light hand laid upon his wrist, the other extended in the direction of the hoped-for land, while the flush of expectation was on her cheek. The evening breeze freshened and filled the sails, and the vessels bounded over the rippling waters; but Rhunelda saw not, heard not: deaf upon her ears came the sounds of mirth from the hinder part of the vessel, where those who were not actually needed in the navi-

gation were engaged in feasting ; her whole soul was absorbed in looking.

They drew nearer ; the bank grew more distinct ; there could no longer be any doubt that it was a long, low line of hills. It is but fair to state that the old warrior was almost as much pleased as Rhunelda herself. He would have called his comrades, that they too might see the joyful sight ; but Rhunelda, restored to all her wonted activity of mind, forbade him.

'No,' she said ; 'if my people had not sufficient confidence in me to expect the land at the time I told them, they may wait awhile before we inform them. We will, in the meantime, look out for some river into which we can run our ships before we are seen from the shore. The moon is full to-night, and we shall have plenty of light,

Suddenly a cry arose on board, coming from whom they could not tell, that 'Land is in sight !' Instantly all crowded to the prow. There it lay before them, stretching north and south ; and now they could discern the mouth of a small river, into which they guided their ships.

There was no limit to Rhunelda's popularity at that moment—nothing was to be heard but her praises ; and, although her honesty might lead her not to believe so fully in her supernatural powers, to which her ardent followers ascribed all their success, she not unnaturally felt that she deserved some credit for the skill with which she had directed her vessels, and for the steady faith with which she had persevered in that course, even when most strongly advised to give it up by those on whom she was accustomed to place the greatest reliance.

All was now joyous bustle and activity on board; every sail was crowded to arrive at the entrance of the river before their approach should have been discovered by any of the inhabitants of the devoted country; while Rhunelda held high council with her most trusted friends as to the course to be taken.

By the time the moon had risen, and was lighting up the waters with a silver glow, they had reached the mouth of the little Kentish river up which they meant to take their ships. Here some of the warriors landed to explore the country, and to secure any provisions or easy booty that came in their way, Rhunelda, like a wise general, remaining on board until she should see her vessels safely disposed of in some quiet, secure nook. The breeze had gone down when they entered the river, but this was 'no obstacle to their progress; the warriors rowed steadily and rapidly. Rhunelda stood on the deck admiring the green banks of the river, the quiet beauty of which formed a great contrast to the stern, savage hills among which she had grown up. There was no sign of life or habitation of any sort; but this was in favour of the Northmen rather than otherwise, for they would prefer, when they retreated, to have no enemies along the river to contend with, who might, in case of their being obliged to fly, offer an obstacle to their escape.

At last when morning dawned they had reached a sheltered part of the river, defended by a deep impassable morass on the one side, and shut in on the other by a range of hills, beyond which lay a rich open country. Here then they took up their abode, not troubling themselves to make much of a camp, as their

object was plunder, not settlement, and they looked to their ships for getting them off, for whose safety they accordingly provided. Their arrangements were soon made. They divided into two bands; one, under the old warrior, was to sweep the northern side of the river; and the second, under Rhunelda herself, to explore the southern. They then impatiently awaited the return of the scouts who had landed on first entering the river.

The scouts arrived and brought capital news: the country was rich and fertile, the inhabitants, though tolerably numerous, were unwarlike, and at present in a state of the most profound security. There was nothing now to delay the departure of the warriors, who accordingly started with morning light on their plundering excursions.

Long and bitterly had the inhabitants of Kent to rue that visit; there was nothing to oppose the invaders; the king was weak, the government in disorder, and no regular defence organised. After a few faint despairing efforts the people gave themselves up in a kind of fatalism. Fighting seemed hopeless, and they yielded with a vague hope that their submission might have some effect in softening their conquerors, who, if they met with no resistance, would surely have no excuse for perpetrating upon them any extreme violence. In this they were disappointed; had settlement in any way been the object of the invaders, it might have produced an effect; but as they had no such views, they burnt and pillaged without mercy, taking revenge on the helpless inhabitants, wherever they thought the plunder was not so much as it ought to be.

Rhunelda was in her element, but blame her not therefore, reader, for being cruel and bloodthirsty ; she had no love of slaughter, and whenever she could, she interposed between her people and their unhappy victims, to save them from any needless torture. If she was indifferent in inflicting death, it was because she regarded it as the greatest blessing she could bestow upon any one ; to die fighting was in her estimation the happiest of lots, the one that she would most have desired for herself. Was it any wonder that when the Saxons saw her fighting at the head of her followers, uniting the dazzling beauty of a woman with a warrior's strength and courage ; when they saw her ever in the thickest of the fight, yet coming off unhurt where others fell around her ; when they saw that her arm was invincible, that light though her strokes seemed to be, their bravest champions fell before her ; when they heard the stories that were circulated about her, that she was the favoured descendant of the great warrior-god, to whom he had entrusted his magic sword—was it any wonder, we say, that they regarded her with superstitious terror, feeling that where she was, there was no hope for them ? And Rhunelda's spirit rose high with the excitement ; the noise of battle was to her like breathing her native air. Could she always have been fighting, her power would have been absolute ; there was not one of her followers who would not now have gladly killed himself had such been her command ; and she laughed when she thought of Eric's warning.

At length, sated with conquest and loaded with spoil, they returned to their ships. They had to wait yet a

few hours before setting sail, for the arrival of the old warrior and his band; but the messengers who had passed between him and Rhunelda had kept her informed of his movements, and that though his expedition was perhaps not quite so successful as hers had been, still there was nothing to complain of; and they expected speedily to rejoin their companions with a very fair share of booty.

It was late in the afternoon; the Northmen, their toil over for the present, were feasting high, and their shouts of laughter and songs over their wine resounded far and near. Rhunelda was not with them; she sat alone, thoughtful. The excitement of the fight, the danger, the difficulty, that were her joy, were almost over. Soon she must be back again in her mountain fastness, with the long dreary winter months before her. What would she have to do? what to occupy her mind? what to fill up the aching void? She had no one to love, or to be loved by; the admiration of her followers might satisfy her pride, but it could not fill up the want of her heart. She stood alone; with too refined a mind to enjoy gross feasting and excess, she had yet nothing to take its place; she had thrown aside the duties of a woman, to take, up those of a man, and she was paying the penalty.

It was a heavy price for these few brief hours of excitement, those long dark days of loneliness and weariness, when her spirit drooped and pined. Could Eric have stood before her at that moment, and told her that if she would give up her martial glory, her mad desire for fame, he would give her in return gentle hearty affection, she would have accepted the offer; but Eric

was many miles away, the temptation was not presented.

She was roused from her reverie by the sound of voices and the trampling of feet; and looking up she perceived, at the distance of less than a quarter of a mile along the river's bank, a band of advancing warriors, which she had little difficulty in recognising as the detachment of her followers that she was expecting.

She rose a little wearily and prepared to meet them, but she well knew that any reluctance on her part in this emergency would be the surest incentive to discontent. 'What,' her followers would say, 'is the pleasure or profit of serving a leader who does not praise and reward faithful service?' No appearance of backwardness was visible in her manner as she greeted the old warrior, who now came in advance of his troop to report upon the success of his enterprise. Any one seeing those two meet would have thought them the best friends in the world, and so indeed they were for the time being, for the warrior was satisfied with himself, and therefore with Rhunelda, who listened eagerly to his account.

'We have brought but few prisoners, as thou commandedst,' he said; 'in fact, only one worth naming, and he is a Christian bishop!'

'A Christian bishop!' said Rhunelda, in a tone of not altogether pleased surprise.

'Yes,' replied the warrior, grimly; 'we have brought him here that he may die the death he deserves. But for his encouraging the people, they would not have made the resistance they did; we should not have been

so long delayed ; it would not have cost us so many lives : therefore we have brought him that all might share the vengeance.'

'Ye must not slay him,' cried Rhunelda, in horror.

'Wouldest thou have the blood of thy best followers poured out, and yet not take vengeance on the man who was the cause of it ?'

'He must be saved,' said Rhunelda, passionately, making a step forward, as she heard the shouts of joy and triumph with which those in the camp received their friends, mingled with deep groans and hisses.

'He must be saved !' she repeated.

'Save him then !' said the old warrior, folding his arms.

Rhunelda was extremely agitated ; she saw the abyss over which she stood, perceived the trap that had been laid for her. Should she now refuse to gratify her people, all would be over with her. She too would fall a sacrifice to their fury without being able to save him, for she well knew how impossible it was to stem their rage.

'Why not,' whispered one voice within her, 'why not let him go to his fate ? He is a Christian, one of those hated, cowardly Christians.'

But in spite of her strongest efforts, there also rose before her mind's eye the image of old John. She had not thought of him for years, had almost forgotten his very existence ; yet now he persistently recurred to her, calm, good, benignant, far removed from her world of passion. Eric too, on whose courage and conduct no one ventured to cast a slur, Eric had declared himself a Christian, and had dared death, and the losing of his

hopes, rather than give up his faith. It was one thing to cut down the Christians in battle, at least then she ran as much danger as they did; another to slaughter one in cold blood. Yes, she would save the Bishop at any price; but she glanced at the hard impenetrable face beside her, and felt how difficult it would be. He saw her agitation, and there was a gleam of cunning triumph upon his face; Rhunelda saw this, it restored her energy, and she spoke:

‘Thou sayest thou wilt take his life, because he encouraged his people to fight against us, and therefore was the cause of our losing so many men? but surely thou wilt not slay him at once, for then his fellow-countrymen would not know wherefore it was done; it would produce no feeling of terror upon them, it would not prevent their doing the same again, for they would *not* understand that our vengeance is swift and sure, and woe betide him who does us wrong. Would it not be better to try him to-morrow, in presence of his fellow-captives, and if he is found guilty kill *him*; then let *them* go, that they may spread abroad through the land the tidings of our revenge and our power.’

It may be doubted if the old warrior would have accepted this proposal, but several of his companions who had followed him up the hill to hear Rhunelda’s judgment, not quite so eager for the victim’s blood, and perhaps not having the same desire to push Rhunelda to extremities, at once signified their approval. If Rhunelda felt relieved at having thus postponed the worst and comforted herself with the hope that perhaps before to-morrow she might find some excuse for letting the prisoner off, or even during the night contrive some

means for his escape, any such hope was blighted when she heard the sullen murmur of the old warrior, when he found he was in a minority :

‘ I will watch him well ; he shall not escape. If he attempts it, I will cut him down with my battle-axe.’

She gave the most positive orders that the prisoner should be well and mercifully treated, but she could do no more ; and it was with a sickening feeling that she lay down to rest, while her followers were still making merry in the camp below.

CHAPTER XV.

‘ But all his serious thoughts had rest in heaven.
As some tall cliff that lifts its awful form,
Swell from the vale and midway leaves the storm,
Though round its breast the rolling clouds are spread,
Eternal sunshine settles on its head.’

GOLDSMITH.

RHUNELDA passed a restless night ; she did not sleep, but she lay listening till there should be quiet in the camp, that she might visit the prisoner, which was impossible while all were awake and about. The sounds of feasting came up to where she lay, wild shouts and songs, and as she heard them she loathed her companions.

‘ Brutes !’ she murmured, in low impassioned accents, while she pressed her forehead upon her clasped hands, as if by that she would still its throbbing, and shut out all sound. There was a wild storm raging in her

breast. Ambition, love of glory, all that she held most dear, in dire opposition to the new desire for mercy. If at one moment she resolved to leave him to his fate, the next, the thought maddened her that it would be like slaying a father. What if he should resemble John, of whom she thought with affection and reverence, and whom, even Oscar, with all his sternness and ferocity, had always spared !

‘Father !’ she cried, with bitter though stifled accents, ‘ why didst thou leave me ? Thou at least couldest be merciful when thou choosest, and no one found fault with thee.’

It was long past midnight, and still the feasting went on. Rhunelda looked at the sky and sighed heavily ; and rising, endeavoured to allay the fever of her mind by pacing up and down under some trees. It was dark and chilly here, but such was the burning heat of her mood that she heeded it not. By degrees the sounds ceased in the camp ; it grew stiller and stiller, and all was profound silence. Now was her time.

Rhunelda glided down the hill, and through the midst of the camp ; all lay sleeping around her. As she glanced at the huge forms dimly seen in the uncertain light, the thought rose, how easy it would be for any enemy to surprise them ! The very sentinels were asleep, as if they feared no foe. She passed through the lines without being discovered. She paused for a moment beside the old warrior ; he seemed profoundly asleep, yet she had a curious feeling that she was watched ; but he moved not, and she could not but suppose that he was unconscious of her presence.

Now she was at the tent where the prisoner was

confined. The guards lay asleep outside, but their postures and the energetic way they grasped their weapons showed that their slumber was less heavy than that of their companions; their hatred had overcome even their darling passion. She raised the curtain and entered; all was so dark within that it was with difficulty she distinguished a figure huddled up in one corner, that started at her approach and raised itself as much upright as the chain with which it was loaded would allow.

‘Who comes there?’ it demanded.

‘Hush!’ said Rhunelda, in carefully subdued tones.
‘A friend?’

‘Is it a woman’s voice, I hear?’ said the prisoner.
‘Then there is hope. A woman’s tender heart—’

‘No such thing is near thee!’ said Rhunelda, in a low, hard voice. ‘I have no pity, no feeling; yet I would save thee. What is this they accuse thee of?’

‘Of doing my duty,’ said the prisoner; ‘of defending my poor people, whom God has suffered to be chastised for their sins. But that is an excuse; thy friends would kill me, not because I fight against them—for they have generous hearts, and can see and admire courage—but because I am a Christian.’

‘And therefore,’ said Rhunelda, passionately, ‘I detest thee.’

‘Then wherefore hast thou come?’ asked the prisoner.
‘Thy first words were not those of one who comes to exult over a fallen enemy.’

‘Though I hate thee,’ she replied more calmly, ‘there is that in me which forbids me to slay thee.’

‘Heaven be praised!’ said the bishop. ‘Then there

is some feeling in this poor creature's heart! May I not employ the time that is left to me in converting her?

'Impossible!' said Rhunelda. 'Could I be converted, I had been so long since; for I have seen Christianity in a good old man, and in a young one, the best whom I ever knew.'

Though Rhunelda strove to pronounce these last words with perfect indifference, she did not succeed so completely as to prevent the bishop, who was a keen observer, from noticing the change. He longed for light, that he might see the face of his singular visitor.

'Daughter,' he said mildly, 'thy manner betrays that thou hast a mind ill at ease. May not some part of thy trouble arise from thy pertinaciously refusing to be taught?'

'I am at ease,' said Rhunelda, hastily.

If there had been light enough, she might have seen the bishop smile.

'Thy very haste confirms my opinion,' he said.

'Let us leave my state, and talk of thine,' said Rhunelda.

'As thou wilt,' said the bishop, sighing. 'It matters very little what becomes of me. My enemies can shorten my life but by a little space, and happy indeed it is for me if my Lord thinks me worthy to suffer for His Name's sake. But as I believe that He would not put before me some way of escape had He not still work for me, how is it that thou canst help me? Canst thou persuade thy people to let me go, on paying a ransom?'

'No,' said Rhunelda, 'I fear not. It is little that I can do for thee.'

'I thought,' said the prisoner, 'that my fate depended, not on the will of the people, or on that of my captors, but on one who is a disgrace to the name of woman—Rhunelda, the daughter of Oscar.'

A glow of fierce indignation ran through Rhunelda's frame.

'Peace, old man!' she said haughtily. 'Condemn not what thou understandest not. I am Rhunelda! I am the daughter of Oscar!'

'Pardon, Lord, my hastiness!' said the bishop. 'Wondrous, indeed, are Thy ways—unlike the ways of man. Grant me but one brief hour, that I may do somewhat towards saving the soul of this unhappy woman. Daughter,' he continued to Rhunelda, 'it is indeed time that thou humblest thy pride and repentest, while thou hast yet the occasion. It is no longer doubtful what line of conduct I ought to pursue; for in thee it would be deadly sin to take my life—thou must save me!'

'But how?' said Rhunelda, her indignation gone, and not even ruffled by the tone of authority, to which she was little accustomed.

'Thou canst refuse to thy people to slay me.'

'But what good would my refusal do?' said Rhunelda. 'I am powerless: they would not obey me.'

'Report says,' replied the bishop, sternly, 'that thy authority over them is absolute.'

'In battle, yes,' said Rhunelda; 'they would follow me anywhere, do anything I say *then*; but let me once cross their will, and thou wouldest see the difference. They have made up their minds to slay thee, and my refusing my consent would not save thee; it would only cost my own life.'

‘If thou diedst a Christian——’ began the bishop.
‘I am not such a fool as that,’ interrupted Rhunelda.
‘Having persecuted and slain Christians all my life,
and intending to do so till I die, to think because I will
not consent to thy death, that therefore I shall gain ad-
mittance to thy heaven ! No, I should never see my
brave ancestors, nor should I gain anything in exchange.
I wish to do my best for thee, however ; and all that I
can see is that thou shouldest try to make thy escape.
I am willing to risk so much for thy sake, and for that
reason I am here.’

‘But how can I escape ?’ said the bishop, manifestly
disappointed. ‘Look at these chains !’

Rhunelda bent over him and tried to unfasten them :
she could not. She next tried to break them by means
of the heavy axe she held in her hand : it was beyond
her strength.

‘Thou canst not do it, daughter,’ said the bishop.
‘But though thou canst not save my body, let me at
least do my best to save thy soul.’

‘One more trial,’ said Rhunelda, her proud spirit
rebelling at the thought of a captive enemy seeing her
beaten. She raised her axe.

‘Hush !’ said the bishop; ‘there are steps approaching.’
She started round with rather a guilty look. The
curtain of the tent was raised ; the old warrior entered.

‘*Thou* here !’ he exclaimed.

But the very excess of his amazement convinced
Rhunelda that it was no surprise to him ; that he was
well aware what she was doing, and that most probably
he had listened to her conversation. Her spirit rose to
the occasion.

'Yes,' she replied haughtily; 'and if I choose to visit my prisoners, I should like to know who has a right to make objection?'

'None, certainly,' replied the other, with a sneer; 'but I came to fetch the prisoner. The sun is already high, thy warriors are assembled, and thou canst not wish to delay the trial. We shall not get off as it is till noonday; and when once the report spreads that a bishop is our prisoner, we shall have the whole country up and swarming about our ears, and we may find it hard to get off at all.'

Rhunelda cast one glance at the bishop, to intimate to him her desire to help him and her utter powerlessness, and then left the tent. He gave a pitying glance after her, scarcely heeding that the warrior was desiring him to arise and follow him. The light when first he issued from the dark tent was so strong, that it was a few seconds before he could distinguish anything clearly; and when he was able to separate the objects before him, the sight he saw was one to affright the stoutest heart.

On either side the Northmen were drawn up in a long row, their eyes gleaming with a savage glare, all thirsty for his blood.

But the bishop's eye did not rest on any of these fierce warriors; it flew quickly to where, leaning against a heavy stone a little above her followers, stood Rhunelda. Very different was she from what he had imagined her, when first he inveighed with pious horror against the atrocities committed in her name and under her command, when he had described her as a monster in woman's shape; and equally unlike

was she to what he had pictured when he heard her words of pity, and had thought of her as a gloomy, dark figure, weighed down by unprofitable, ever-gnawing remorse. It was with a start that he gazed upon that lovely face, which seemed as if it ought to be the picture of all that was most loving and gentle in woman. Her brow was anxious; but the prisoner read neither the sorrow for the past that his recent conversation with her led him to expect, nor that bloodthirstiness for which he had looked when first he heard of her.

Of course, the trial was but a mockery; for even if among themselves the Northmen were sufficiently civilised to practise a kind of rude justice, they were not very likely to give the benefit of it to a man they meant to destroy. The old warrior gave a relation of what had happened, describing the bishop as a kind of rebel resisting lawfully constituted authority; he called no witness and gave no proof, and when he had concluded, put it to the vote as to whether or not the bishop ought to die. It was passed unanimously in the affirmative, and several looked ready at once to put the sentence into execution, when Rhunelda, striking her axe against her shield to attract attention, exclaimed in a loud, commanding voice:

‘What proof do ye bring that all this is true?’

‘Dost thou doubt my word?’ demanded the old warrior, with flashing eyes.

‘Not at all,’ replied Rhunelda; ‘I fully believe thee.’

‘Then why dost thou require witness for what is already as clear as the day?’

‘For my own pleasure,’ replied Rhunelda, haughtily.

‘Such is my will, and unless thou at once fulfillest it, I

will have thee hanged up at the same time as the bishop for a rebel.'

'That is the way thou rewardest true service,' said the old warrior, to the highest degree incensed.

But Rhunelda, who knew that her power was still such that her most arbitrary order of this nature would be obeyed, only smiled, and several of the other jarls threw themselves between the angry leader and their young commander, and entreated him to be calm, to waste no more of their precious time, but to produce such witnesses as might satisfy Rhunelda—'for,' said they, 'the Northmen have been ever willing to content their leaders when such was possible'—that the matter might be settled, and that they might begin their journey.

Accordingly, grumbling and sullen, the old warrior produced from among his followers a sufficient number of witnesses to prove, even to the most obstinate mind, that the bishop was indeed guilty of what they accused him—*i.e.*, encouraging his people to fight to the utmost against their cruel persecutors, and once again there rose the universal cry for his blood.

Rhunelda was cruelly racked; the bishop's words rang in her ears, 'In thee it would be deadly sin to slay me.' Sin! sin against whom? Such a sacrifice would be pleasant to her own gods. Could there be another in the universe more mighty than they? Rhunelda's conscience told her there was, but she had not the courage to speak out; she could not, like her playfellow Eric on a former occasion, forfeit everything rather than do what she believed to be wrong. She could not say that she believed the bishop to be a holy man, and that

it would be an act of wickedness in her to consent to his death ; no, she weakly endeavoured to compromise —she represented to her people that they would gain little by putting the bishop to death, whereas they might obtain a large sum of money for his ransom.

‘That is not thy design,’ said the old warrior, furious at seeing signs of accepting this proposal among his companions; thou art a traitor and a Christian thyself! Did I not hear thee with mine own ears tell him that thou wouldest let him go? Didst thou not attempt to release him from his bonds? and if I had not come in when I did, he would be now at liberty. Vile traitor! thou art discovered.’

It is impossible to describe the scene of confusion that followed this denunciation; there were cries of ‘Down with her!’ ‘Slay her at the same moment as the bishop! let not either escape.’ But though there were many to command, there were none to fulfil this order. The Northmen drew back with superstitious awe; their enemies regarded their young leader as something supernatural; they themselves knew her to be the peculiar favourite of the gods: it would be sacrilege to touch her.

It was a strange scene; the swaying groups of the warriors; Rhunelda’s varying expression; the bishop calmly surveying the whole, as if it no more concerned him than as an interesting spectacle. At length the advice of the elder jarls was taken, and the question was put to Rhunelda:

‘Art thou a Christian?’

‘No!’ she replied, with haughty defiance.

'Then consent to the bishop's death ; thyself give the fatal stroke.'

'I cannot !' she exclaimed in agony. 'Often as I have killed men, and will yet kill them, in battle, I cannot strike down an old man who has done me no harm.'

'Done thee no harm ?' shouted the old warrior. He was silenced by his companions, and the question was again put, altered a little in tenor : 'Wilt thou consent to the death of the bishop ?'

Her lips moved, but no sound issued from them.

'Consent to it, or die !' said an old grey-headed jarl, who had fought under her father ; and he stepped forward, accompanied by two of his companions, and all three raised their battle-axes, ready to put an end to her life should she refuse. There was an awful pause, while all waited for her answer ; all, everything, hung upon her words. If she refused, there was an end of all ; of the mission her father had given her to fulfil ; of the glory and fame she had fought so hard and so long to obtain, for she could not expect that Odin would welcome to his halls one who had died a renegade to his faith.

'I do consent !' she said, in a sort of desperation. There was a deafening shout raised by the Northmen, in which were lost the wails and sobs of the prisoners, who, till then, had cherished the hope that their beloved bishop might yet be spared to them. At that moment Rhunelda would fain have recalled her words, but she lacked the moral courage to speak out, and she stood by in a kind of stupor while there was a discussion as to what way they should put the bishop to death.

'Burn him!' cried some one. 'Let him be a beacon to light us from the coast.'

It was agreed to. Rhunelda uttered a cry of horror, but it passed unnoticed. She would have sprung forward in eager expostulation, but an icy hand seemed to have turned her to stone; she could not move a limb. They led the bishop past her on the way to execution. He turned upon her a kind, pitying, intensely sorrowful glance.

'If I could but think,' he said, 'that the fagots which consume me would light such a flame in the heart as, by God's mercy, might never be extinguished, I could die happy.'

She heard him, but his voice seemed to come from a world very far away. She stood leaning against a stone, watching, with a vacant eye, the preparations on the plain below her. Suddenly there rose a white wreath of smoke; then a long tongue of flame, ever increasing, burning hotter and fiercer; then the smoke grew black as night, and hung over the spot like a thick veil, as if to hide from the light of day the foul work that was being there carried on. Above the crackling of the fire, above the exulting shouts of the conquerors, rose the bitter weepings and wailings of the other prisoners, who were scarcely to be restrained from rushing into the flames to share the fate of their shepherd.

Rhunelda started as if suddenly awakened from a slumber, shuddered violently, then darted full speed down the hill, hurried on board one of the vessels, and flung herself down in a corner, where she buried her face in a heap of furs, as if she would thereby shut out the horrid sights and sounds that were going on on

shore ; nor did she rouse herself till some hours after the English coasts had faded into mist.

CHAPTER XVI.

'What seest thou from the watch-tower high,
Far o'er the billowy main,
Where the sea seems to mingle with the sky ?
A long, black line.
'A cloud, perhaps, that dips in the sea ?
No cloud was so sharp as this.
A bird !—No ; then what can it be ?
An enemy, I fear.
'See how it comes, ever nearer and nearer,
Like a white-winged bird of prey ;
Its form one can see, ever clearer and clearer,
And the foe upon its deck.
'See how, ready armed, they stand,
Those cruel, hungry foes.
They have visited many a happy land,
And their name is cursed by all.'

IT was now late in the summer ; the sun rose later and set earlier ; and though at noon tide the heat was still great, the nights were sensibly cooler. The snow was already beginning to creep down from the summits of the highest mountains, whither, as to a last fortress, it had been driven by the summer, and soon, once again, the winter-king would hold everything in his icy grasp.

One by one the bands of Northmen were returning to their fastnesses, laden with booty, in high spirits with themselves and with their leaders, prepared to spend the winter in feasting ; or else unsuccessful, and

out of temper with everything, ready to take offence at the slightest provocation, and thankfully hailing an occasion to rid themselves of their leader whom they believed to be the cause of their defeat;—except in those instances where they held the theory that all he did was right, and that their loss was not owing to his incapacity or misconduct, but to some circumstance over which he had no power. But such cases had always been rare, and now were becoming rarer, as, year by year, the elder warriors died off, and either a young chief, finding himself at the head of an experienced band, disgusted them by his levity, or by his adopting new foreign fashions ; or an aged leader saw himself alone, looked round, and found none of the companions of his youth, but a set of hot-headed youngsters, impatient of his control, and despising those traditions of his early years to which he was attached. Thus each year of ravage, while it might not perhaps, to any degree, civilise the Northmen, slackened their discipline, and took from them some of their wild, savage virtues.

This summer had been passed by Thorganger's band in comparative inactivity. After the expedition against Horslonger they did not engage in any other of importance, but contented themselves with repelling the attacks of those separate bands of Horslonger's widely-spread connection who came to avenge their leader's death ; but lately these attacks had been growing fewer, and at last almost entirely ceased. The band was, to a certain extent, without a leader, for Eric was not yet strong enough to bear arms. Thorganger was getting feeble, and Harold, though he had latterly risen in favour with the old chief, was still thought too little of, on account

of his continual timidity, to make either the band or Thorganger willing to trust, the first their lives, or the other his honour, in such hands.

One evening, when it was getting dusk, Thorganger and Eric were walking on one of the terraces below the castle. Eric was still pale and slight, but with the manifest appearance of returning health. They were talking earnestly, and the faces of both wore a certain air of anxiety.

'I do not like this lull,' said Thorganger. 'I think it bodes mischief.'

'But perhaps,' Eric replied, 'they are tired of their attempts. They see we are constantly upon our guard, and have desisted.'

'Maybe, maybe,' said Thorganger; 'but it seems strange that Vestick should not have come, so strong a force as he has, too.'

'Perhaps,' suggested his grandson, 'he is better employed; has work to do, and glory to find elsewhere.'

'No,' said Thorganger, 'he is at home. I know that by the hand of a sure messenger. He but waits the return of his brethren from the south to fall upon us with an overwhelming force. He is Horslonger's near kinsman, and many who would not fight for the living Horslonger, so detested was he, will avenge him now that he is dead.'

'And let them come!' cried the young chief, proudly. 'Are we not enough to fight them?'

Thorganger shook his head sadly. 'When our numbers were full and undivided,' he said, 'we were but just able to cope with Horslonger and his kinsmen; but now—'

'We are undivided still,' said Eric; 'thy band will fight well for thee, their father; and thou canst sit at home and give the orders, while Harold and I fulfil them.'

'Why dost thou always name Harold in the same breath as thyself?' asked Thorganger, jealously.

'Because he is to me like a friend and a brother,' replied Eric.

'Heaven grant that he prove not thy rival,' muttered Thorganger. 'No, Eric, thou art yet young and inexperienced, and knowest not the dangers that lie before thee. Once more I ask thee, Why wilt thou not wed Elfleda ?'

'Grandfather, I cannot love her;' and he added, rather embarrassed: 'I think that she loves me not.'

'What of that?' said Thorganger, impatiently; 'what is a woman's will in such a matter? She must do as she is bid. If I choose her to marry thee, she must; and I tell thee, Eric, wert thou but a few months younger, I would force thee to marry her without delay. Why wilt thou abuse thy strength, take advantage of thy fame to thwart thy old grandfather ?'

'But,' said Eric, rather evading this last appeal, 'it is but recently that Elfleda has known me, may she not before have fixed her affections on some playmate, some companion of her youth, some one among thy far-famed jarls ?'

Thorganger's eyes flashed; he clenched his hands and seemed with difficulty to be restraining himself. Eric saw that he must not pursue the subject further, and in the dread of his grandfather saying something that might lead to betraying the lovers, he looked round for some object to divert the old chief's attention, and espied Sigismund coming towards them out of the castle; but there was

something in the old warrior's expression that thrilled him with a strange foreboding. Thorganger too seemed to perceive it, for he stopped short in a tirade that he was beginning against Elfleda and her presumed lover, to exclaim sharply :

' What is it, Sigismund ? Dost bring us bad news ?'

' Very,' replied the old warrior. ' Vestick has but been waiting the arrival of his kindred from the south to attack us ; they are now collected under his banner, and are marching towards us. They are only two days distant, so say our scouts ; they must surely arrive the day after to-morrow, even sooner.'

Thorganger gave a glance at his grandson, which expressed : ' I told you so ;' but as he did not speak, Eric ventured to say :

' Something must be done directly ; our forces must be collected as quickly as possible ; part of them must be sent out to meet the enemy—they may yet be defeated and driven back—and the remainder must guard the castle ; we might yet defend it some time, should the worst happen.'

' Prudent advice, and bravely given,' said Sigismund ; ' but what saith the old chief ?'

' I agree to it,' said Thorganger. ' The work will be hard and the danger great ; but who is to lead the band sent out ? Thou Eric, art not strong enough ; Sigismund must go to collect help ; and I doubt if I leave the castle whether thou wilt be able to keep half a dozen men within.'

' Harold ! grandfather.'

' Harold ! always Harold !' said Thorganger, with the jealous irritability of age.

'Nevertheless,' said Sigismund, 'what the lad counsels is good. Harold is strong and well-liked; and though he would be little use in defending the castle where endurance and hopefulness are needed, he might well lead a band where the work would be short and sharp, and no considering. Harold always does best where there is no chance of drawing back.'

'But if thou dost not agree to it, grandfather——;' began Eric.

Thorganger interrupted him:

'Yes, yes! I agree to it; I agree to anything.'

Eric would have spoken again, but Sigismund laid his hand upon his arm, and drew him aside:

'Never mind; he is not himself; the news has upset him. We must act and judge for ourselves, only mention it not among the jarls; were he to die, I scarce think we should keep the band together.'

Eric sighed, and followed him to the castle. The preparations were soon made; Sigismund started in one direction to seek help among their friends and allies in the south; while Harold, with a chosen band, went out in the other, to repulse them, if possible, before they got further; and Eric, if this were not successful, was to hold out the castle until Sigismund should return with succour.

'I wish thou wert coming with me, Eric,' said Harold, as he bid his friend farewell.

'That cannot be,' said Eric; 'fight well, and prove thyself worthy of Elfleda.'

'If I can ever do that,' began Harold, mournfully.

'At least do thy best,' broke in Eric; 'remember that thou owest some duty to Thorganger, who has been to

thee like a father,' he added, cutting short Harold's usual answer, when his friend urged upon him courage and conduct, that Elfleda did not care for warlike glory.

Having seen the band depart with many wishes for its good success, Eric returned to the care of putting the dwelling into the best posture for defence. This provided for, he determined to seek out Varenga, and if possible get rid of her from the castle. It was not that he feared treachery on her part, but he had a feeling that she was best out of the way; the men had a superstitious awe of her, and he felt sure that were she to appear with her light gliding step and cold snake-like eye, there would be an end of all fighting there. He himself was slightly afraid of her—he would have been far beyond his age if he had not been; and he thought that for every reason it was better she should go in a peaceable manner, if that were possible.

He accordingly went to the room where she was usually to be found composing salves or drinks from different herbs. She was not there; he made his way to his cousin's apartment. Elfleda was kneeling by the window with her hands clasped; her expression was very sad, and there were traces of tears upon her face; and as Eric stood and looked, he thought he had never seen anything so sweet and beautiful. But he made some sound, and she started round.

'Who is there?' she asked, with a quick frightened look.

'I, Eric,' said her cousin, and entered.

'Oh, Eric!' said Elfleda, coming a few steps to meet him, 'dost thou think he will come back alive?'

'Who?' asked Eric, rather absently, his mind being

occupied with conjectures as to where Varenga could be, seeing she was not here with Elfleda.

'I mean,' said Elfleda, colouring, 'dost thou think any of them will come back alive from this encounter with Vestick's people, so much more numerous than they are?'

'Oh, yes! I hope so,' said Eric; 'I trust they will come back victorious.—Poor Harold!' he thought, 'no wonder he was depressed at starting, if this was the kind of farewell she gave him.'

He then told her his intentions about Varenga, and asked where she was. Elfleda had not seen or heard her for several hours.

'Can she,' she asked, in a frightened tone, 'have gone to the enemy to guide them here?'

'I think not,' replied Eric, thoughtfully. 'I have no fear of her betraying us; and yet I should like to know where she is. Do not mention her absence, Elfleda; and when she returns keep a close eye upon her, until thou canst inform me.'

'I cannot, Eric; indeed I cannot,' said Elfleda; 'thou dost not know how she frightens me; I think she must be some evil spirit in disguise. Look but at her eye. Did ever mortal woman have such an eye, hard and glittering like an iceberg?'

'Nonsense, Elfleda,' said Eric; 'thou must conquer this cowardice.'

'It is well for thee to say nonsense,' said Elfleda, with hurt dignity; 'but thou knowest her not, thou dost not spend thy days with her.'

'I thought she was often out,' Eric could not forbear saying. 'But,' he added pleadingly, 'thou wilt

try to do it, Elfleda ? remember that it is for thy grandfather.'

'I will let thee know when she returns,' said Elfleda, 'but I cannot detain her, if she would desire to go.'

And with this Eric was obliged to depart.

'So that is the wife my grandfather wanted to give me ?' he muttered, as he went his way; 'much good she would be to a warrior.'

He told his grandfather of Varenga's disappearance, asking his advice as to the best course to pursue; but Thorganger made him no answer. He was engaged in polishing an old rusty sword, and as he worked his lips moved; clearly he was not himself to-day, and Eric, with a heavy heart, went about his preparation. He longed for some news, even should it be bad, for he felt that the sure knowledge of misfortune would be preferable to the dull weight of uncertainty that now hung over him.

It was early morning when the warriors started, surely there would be some tidings of them before evening; he was not mistaken. Towards evening they descried men coming towards the castle rapidly, like men that were flying, but without the disorderly appearance of a rout. Their comrades hastened to meet them, to learn that they had been defeated by an overwhelming force, that was advancing on three sides to attack the castle.

But though naturally discouraged, they were not disheartened by their defeat; and they fully agreed with Eric that what they had to do now, was to defend the river, and prevent the enemy from crossing, until the arrival of Sigismund with reinforcements; when they

might hope to engage the foe upon more equal terms.

All spoke in the highest praise of their young leader ; it was evident that he had done his best. Eric went to meet him as he came in among the last of the stragglers. Harold flung himself into his friend's arms, exclaiming :

'Eric, I have failed, as I always do. Oh, why didst thou not go ?'

'Hush, Harold !' said Eric, kindly but firmly ; 'thou hast done thy best, and no man can do more. Come and help me, for Thorganger is so strange, I can get neither command nor advice from him.'

Harold accompanied him, but Eric soon discovered that he was too much exhausted to be very useful, so he sent him to rest ; and ordered all who were not actually wanted to keep watch to do the same, giving strict injunctions that all should be ready to start to arms at the first notice ; and then watched himself throughout the night.

He did not expect his enemies before morning ; their progress had been stopped by Harold's little band. And now that they knew that all attempt at surprise was hopeless, they were likely to advance more slowly, so as to overwhelm their foes with the crushing weight of numbers.

His conjectures proved right ; the sun had already risen when the enemy appeared in sight, on the opposite side of the river, in thick masses ; far superior in number to the little band assembled to stop them.

'See how they descend the hill,' said a warrior who was standing beside Eric ; 'some traitor must be guiding

them, or they never could have found the path so easily.'

The thought passed through Eric's mind : ' Could it be Varenga ?' but he prudently said not a word of his suspicion, and only answered :

' No doubt they have well surveyed the ground before.'

He then went to tell his grandfather of the arrival of the foe ; but Thorganger, still in the same mood, paid him no attention. He summoned Harold, and together they stood watching their enemies defile down the opposing bank ; but when they reached the river they had to stop. It was a tidal one, and at this hour the ford was impracticable, so they sat down on the shore and slopes of the hill, to wait with what patience they might the moment when they should be able to effect a crossing.

Eric prevented his little band from attacking them ; the arrows or stones that they could hurl against them would be far too few to make any impression on those serried ranks ; while among themselves, on the contrary, every man was precious.

Thus passed the hours until the state of the tide permitted the invaders to cross the river. Then began the struggle, and hard and obstinately was it maintained. If the attackers were by far the most numerous, the opponents made up in some measure by their advantage of position. Both were animated with the most burning hatred of each other ; but on the one side they were fighting for vengeance, and on the other for life, and in this instance the thirst for blood proved less strong than the instinct of self-preservation. Night

came, and the invaders had not effected a landing ; once again the tide rolled its protecting waters between the besiegers and the besieged, and with the darkness forbade any further combat till morning.

'Well, Harold,' said Eric, as he cleaned his bloody battle-axe, which had that day done him good service, 'I think we may be satisfied for the present ; if we can hold out to-morrow as we have done to-day, Sigismund must arrive with help before another night, and then we shall be able to turn the tables and give those rogues the beating they deserve.'

At this moment there came a messenger from Thorganger, at once to summon the two young men to his presence. A scout had arrived at the castle.

'What,' cried Eric, joyfully, 'can it possibly be a messenger from Sigismund ?'

But one glance at his grandfather's face when they entered the room, where he and his jarls were assembled, showed that it was no good news he had to communicate.

'Go into the outer chamber,' he said, addressing the jarls with a haughtiness very unlike his usual guarded manner ; 'I would be alone with my grandson.'

When accordingly they were left together, he spoke in a tone of anxiety, in which there was an accent of fierce exultation :

'It is no good, Eric ; we cannot defend ourselves, we are surrounded.'

'Surrounded ! how ?' asked Eric. 'I think not that any of Vestick's forces can have crossed the river.'

'Not Vestick's forces,' answered Thorganger, in the same tone, 'but Vestick's allies from the sea have

landed troops which are now coming up to take us in the rear, and cut off all hope; and they are led by thine old acquaintance, Rhunelda, the daughter of Oscar !

Eric stood for a moment as if stunned.

'Impossible!' he cried at length; 'they must be coming up to aid us.'

'It is like coming to aid us,' answered Thorganger, scornfully, 'to kill one of our scouts, shouting that they did it to avenge the death of Oscar, and to pursue the other so hard that he with difficulty made his escape. But worse yet remains behind,' he continued, eyeing his grandson keenly. 'There is disaffection among our own people; they declare they will not fight in a desperate quarrel without knowing for whom they spend their lives. While I live, it is true, there can be but little doubt; but were anything to happen to me, as so easily might, for whom are they shedding their blood? For a stranger, who cares so little for their feelings, that he will not take measures to secure their affections. Eric thou *must* wed Elfleda, and thou must announce thine intention to do so *at once!*'

There was an instant's pause, while Eric collected his thoughts; then he spoke, and though his cheeks were pale, his words and his voice were as firm as they had been when he had made a similar declaration a few months ago, changed though every circumstance was around him.

'Grandfather,' as I have said before, 'it cannot be. I will not wed Elfleda; I cannot love her; and, yet more, she loves another, and is loved by him.'

‘And who is that other?’ said Thorganger, incredulously.

‘Harold!’

There was a deep pause. Thorganger ground his teeth, but did not speak; then he made a couple of turns in the room, muttering:

‘The old witch’s prophecy was right—my race will end with a coward.’ He turned fiercely upon Eric, ‘So this is the meaning of thy always putting Harold forward? So this is why thou hast thwarted me? Boy! thou shalt repent it, and there shall be no remedy. Follow me!’

And he strode into the outer apartment, where stood the jarls. They had heard his angry voice, and were at that moment consulting as to whether or not it would be advisable to interfere, when Thorganger entered. He went straight up to Harold, and grasping his shoulder, said, in a voice of thunder:

‘And dost thou presume to love Elfleda?’

Harold trembled, and his head swam. He feared Thorganger, and at that instant he felt almost as if he would deny his love rather than incur his chief’s displeasure.

Eric, who had followed his grandfather, and was standing near, said in a low, firm voice:

‘Be true to her; be true to thyself, Harold.’

These words, spoken at the right season, gave Harold courage; he raised his eyes, met Thorganger’s gaze without flinching, and quietly, yet resolutely, said:

‘Yes, I do love her.’

‘And does she love thee?’ demanded Thorganger.

‘Yes.’

The old man's cheek grew scarlet. Several of the jarls, with whom Harold was a favourite, fearful that he might proceed to violence, would have interposed ; but Thorganger prevented them, saying scornfully :

'I will do him no harm ; fetch hither the maiden !'

Eric and another hastily obeyed. Coming first to his cousin's room, Eric exclaimed :

'Elfleda, thou must be brave of heart. Thy happiness depends upon it. Acknowledge the truth, and fear not.'

Elfleda grew very pale when she heard what had happened, and why she was wanted ; and as she rose to obey the summons, her limbs trembled so that she was thankful of the support of Eric's arm.

'Come here, Elfleda,' said her grandfather, when she appeared. 'Fear naught. Dost thou love Harold ?'

'Yes,' replied Elfleda, her pride coming to her aid when she saw how many witnesses there were.

'And was this the cause that thou hesitated when I bade thee wed Eric ?'

'Yes,' replied his granddaughter again.

'Thou shalt have thy wish then,' said Thorganger. He placed her hand in that of Harold, and continued, 'I give thee, Harold, full permission to wed her as soon as thou wilt, and at the same time I make thee mine heir. Thou hast one claim of thyself, thou wilt have another with thy wife, and I give thee all that I can. *Thou* shalt be leader of the Northmen after my death. And as for that boy, who has scorned all that I offer him, who has trodden under foot everything that I hold most dear, I disown him; he may wander forth, like the beggar he is. He is a traitor, and a disobedient son !'

True child of his mother! Let them make ready for instantly attacking the enemy!

Pronouncing these last words, he suddenly threw Harold and Elfleda from him, and rushed from the apartment.

All stood for a few seconds as if stunned; then some of the eldest present went after Thorganger, while Harold's partisans gathered round the lovers to maintain their claims by force of arms should it be necessary; while two or three, who loved Eric for his own sake, and were determined to defend his right, laid their hands on their weapons, though seeing their inferiority of numbers, they remained uncertain, looking at Eric.

Eric did not hesitate; he went up to Harold, and holding out his hand, said warmly:

'Harold, I am very glad; I wish thee joy with all my heart!'

'Oh, Eric! how canst thou?' cried Harold, flinging himself into his arms.

'Nay,' said Eric, 'I am glad that the command should be in worthier hands than mine; and when the time comes, thou shalt see that none will acknowledge thy title more blithely, or be more ready to obey thee, than I. I will serve thee as a brother would, if thou wilt allow me.'

Harold could not answer, and Eric, turning towards the jarls, continued:

'I am no traitor; Thorganger spoke hastily when he called me that, and ye know it. I will fight on your side against your enemies and mine, among the bravest of you. But we are all under Thorganger's orders, and

he bade us make ready for instant fight, and it is time that we did so.'

All joined in the applause due to this simple-hearted generosity, and a message coming from Thorganger that he desired their immediate presence at council, they hurried from the room.

'Thank thee again and again, Eric,' said Elfleda, as her cousin passed her.

'Harold has been to me like a brother,' he answered ; ' thou hast been like a sister. Wouldst thou have had me treat you like enemies ?'

Elfleda did not answer, but, with eyes full of tears, went back to her own chamber. She may perhaps be excused if at that moment she half repented the choice she had made.

No one could have discovered from Eric's manner that he lamented the step he had taken, or was embittered by the change in his position—from being Thorganger's acknowledged heir, and the leader *de facto* in many things, to being worse than nobody, and regarded with suspicion as a possible traitor. He cheerfully yielded the first place to Harold, and never winced when Thorganger ostentatiously consulted the former on the best measures to be taken for their defence, while he regarded him with looks of angry scorn, as if he had been an intruder, or made cutting remarks as to by whom their new enemies were led.

CHAPTER XVII.

'Hark ! heard ye not yon footstep dread,
That shook the ground with thundering tread ?
'Twas *Death*. In haste
The warrior passed.
High tower'd his helmed head.
I mark'd his mail, I mark'd his shield,
I spy'd the sparkling of his spear ;
I saw his giant arm the falchion wield—
Wide wav'd the lick'ring blade, and fired the angry air.'

MASON—*Caractacus*.

MORNING dawned, and there were anxious hearts among the little band of defenders. If once the second attacking force came up before Sigismund arrived, it was impossible that they could hold ; for they would have no respite from fighting, which the periodical rising of the tide now afforded them—they must either perish or yield, for flight there was none.

Thorganger divided his force into three troops ; one, under the command of a trusty jarl, was to garrison the fortress, which, in case of the enemy forcing a passage, was to be held a little longer ; a second, under Harold, was to watch on the top of the hill, to prevent their enemies who were advancing from the sea from falling upon them unawares, and, if it were possible, to beat them back before they should effect a junction with Vestick's followers on the other side of the river ; while the third, under the command of Thorganger himself, was to take up the defence of the ford.

Eric did not think this subdivision of their small

force wise ; but his opinion was not asked, and he comforted himself with the thought of Thorganger's great experience, though he could not conceal from himself that his grandfather was far from being as usual.

Harold looked with dismay on the task assigned him.

'Oh, Eric !' he exclaimed, 'how can I defend this post ? I shall surely make some fatal blunder.'

Eric endeavoured to reassure him ; but Harold was not to be comforted until his friend promised him he would remain with him ; then, as if Eric's presence alone was sufficient to ensure success, his spirits rose.

It was a glorious day, bright and clear, with a peculiar sharpness in the air, which showed that in these high latitudes autumn was already setting in. As the sun rose, his rays were reflected on the battle-axes on either side of the river ; on the one side serried ranks, on the other a few resolute men—all waiting with patience until the tide should be low enough to allow them to begin the fight. At last, one of the assailing warriors sprang into the water ; but the current was still too strong and deep ; he was swept off his feet, and with difficulty regained the friendly bank.

The men under Harold began to grow impatient ; it seemed useless waiting there when they might be doing good service down at the ford. Eric observed this impatience, and calling Harold aside, said to him, in a tone which he was careful to make only suggestive :

'Might it not be better to move farther along the cliff, and see if we can thus discover any signs of our coming foes ?'

Harold eagerly caught at the idea, and, at Eric's

request, communicated it as his own to the warriors, who gladly accepted it, motion of any kind being preferable to waiting. They accordingly set forth, and soon a wind in the valley had hidden from them the sight of their friends, though they could hear, multiplied by distance, the shouts of the combatants. They had come more than a mile and a half, and all these signs had died away, and Harold halted his men for a little rest, and said to Eric :

‘We see no sign of the foe ; might it not be well to return ? Our comrades may be beaten, the ford may be found, and we cannot render them any aid ?’

‘We were not to aid them, in any case,’ said Eric. ‘But what is that ?’ he added suddenly, peering into the valley beneath, which at this part was very wide, owing to the broad green slope on either side of the river : ‘methought I saw the glint of an axe.’

He spoke aloud that all might hear. Several hastened to the edge to look, and one went farther along the cliff. All felt convinced there could be no doubt that their foes were coming through a thick wood which, at the distance of a quarter of a mile, closed in the bed of the river ; but by what strange fatality were they coming along the bottom of the valley instead of its summit ? The Northmen were now in high spirits. Victory seemed certain ; they had but to wait until the enemy reached the open space, and then to rush down upon them, for at this point the descent was even ; and, with a narrowing valley in front, and the wood and deep river behind their foes, whose overwhelming numbers would be rather to their own hindrance. They took measures for concealing themselves until the right

moment—not a difficult task where the huge boulders stood up in every direction like natural bulwarks. Eric's heart beat high as he watched the enemy issue from the wood. There was the well-remembered standard of Oscar the sea-king, the black raven with the golden circle round its throat. There could be no doubt that Rhunelda herself was there, for she, like her father, always went with the standard. Perhaps he should see her; perhaps she might be killed before his eyes. He shuddered; but it never entered his head to neglect anything on that account which could secure the total rout of the enemy. He had been true to his love where only his personal advantage was concerned; now, however, his honour and the safety of his friends were at stake, and he did not weigh it in the balance.

While the foe was yet at a distance a voice beside Eric, singularly clear though low-pitched, pronounced these words: ‘Eric! return thee to the ford; thy presence is sorely needed. There are enough to fight here, but thou only canst save them yonder.’

‘*Thou* here!’ cried Eric, turning sharply and endeavouring to seize the speaker, Varenga, as doubtless the reader has already guessed; ‘thou shalt die the death thou deservest, thou dark witch!’

But Varenga eluded his grasp, and darted away with the speed of a bird; and though twenty arrows flew after her she escaped them all, and disappeared, apparently, over the edge of the cliff. There was a momentary pause of consternation, then a jarl spoke:

‘Eric, thou must straightway return; there may be more in what she says than we wot of; thou alone canst guide Thorganger; he listens to thee when he will listen

to no one else, and he is not himself to-day ; and thou canst be trusted to do thy best for him, and forget his hasty words. Thy coolness may save the ford.'

This advice had more weight coming from one who had always been hostile to Eric, and who, even at the time when his interest was highest, had always stood against him. Eric's cheek flushed with pleasure at this thorough confidence of his word in one who had always shown himself suspicious of him.

Harold turned rather pale at the thought of losing his counsellor, but every one being of opinion that he ought to go he did not oppose it; and with a hearty embrace, and a promise on Eric's side to return speedily should he not find things in so desperate a state as Varenga's words indicated, he started.

Rapidly he retraced the road along the cliff, and impelled by anxiety, though he did not believe in the warning, he had seen enough of the position of the warriors to feel unquiet on the issue of the fight; for if yesterday he, with a whole band, found it difficult to keep the ford, what must Thorganger to-day find, with a diminished force under his command? As he ran, his mind was busy with the thought, what could have brought Rhunelda? Could it be, as Thorganger had insinuated, to avenge her father's death? or could it be, as he had heard it obscurely hinted, that she had come to form an alliance with Vestick, who had ventured to raise his eyes to the hand of the daughter of a sea-king? All such thoughts were, however, put out of his mind when he came within reach of the sounds of the battle of the ford. It was a confused medley, but it seemed to his anxious ear that the shouts uttered

by the party of Vestick prevailed over the more feeble cry of Thorganger's followers. He arrived at the path leading to the castle, he dashed down it, but was stopped in his course by the complete silence ; there was no one on the battlements, no one in the courtyard. He entered ; in the hall he found the women in a frightened group ; among them was Elfleda, pale as death. She cried, on seeing Eric : ‘Has Harold perished ? Hast thou come to tell me of his death ?

‘No,’ replied Eric, hastily ; ‘he was well when I left him, and in no particular danger. But where are the defenders of the castle ?’

‘Gone down to the ford.’

‘What madness !’ cried the young man.

‘Thorganger sent the order,’ was the reply.

‘And was there no one to remind him,’ cried Eric, ‘that the keeping the castle is our last hope of safety until Sigismund comes with succour ?’

Nobody answered, and Eric, with a promise to send up defenders as soon as might be, dashed on his way down to the fight.

When he reached the ford, he found everything in the most dire confusion. Thorganger had had no one by him to correct his mistakes, to do those little things which he had forgotten, but on which, nevertheless, hang so much of the fortune of a battle. When Eric arrived the assailants had already, by their very weight, succeeded in pushing back the defenders a few paces, and thus obtaining a footing. Eric looked for the banner, the raven perched upon an oak. He had little difficulty in finding it ; it was, as usual, in front, and beside it fought Thorganger, despairingly, blindly. Eric

forced his way to his grandfather's side ; forgotten were all his resolutions not to interfere where he was not wanted ; he could not stand by and see the old man perish for want of help. He was only just in time ; Thorganger was closely beset with two in front, while a third raised his weapon over the old chief's head. With one sling of his axe Eric struck this warrior down, and then, with the same success, threw himself against another at the instant that Thorganger, with a return of his ancient strength, felled to the earth the third of his antagonists. He looked round to see who had rendered him such timely assistance, and when he saw Eric he exclaimed :

' Ah ! my brave son ! thou art come back again even from the dead ! Blessings on thee ! Show thyself worthy of the old race !'

' He raves ! ' thought Eric, involuntarily shrinking from the wild light that shone in his grandfather's eyes.

At this moment another warrior waded through the flood and sprung on shore, all making way for him, thus showing him to be a person of importance. He was tall and well made, and his long hair, black as jet, streamed over his shoulders. He flung himself straight upon Thorganger, shouting ' Down ! down with the murderer of Horslonger ! '

Thorganger tottered, and fell beneath the force of that tremendous blow. Eric threw himself between, striking with all his strength ; but the warrior swept round in a second, and dealt him a blow which, although it did not actually wound him, stunned him for the moment. Had the warrior pursued his advantage he must have been slain ; but he was more

anxious to assure himself of Thorganger; thus, leaving Eric, he struck full upon the chest of the prostrate chief. But that moment sufficed for Eric to recover. With a cry of pain as sharp as if he had received the blow himself, he darted at his enemy's throat with the rage of a cat defending its young.

'Ha!' cried the warrior, who was no other than Vestick himself, 'if he was the head, thou art the hands.'

But Eric had the advantage of being on higher ground, and he violently pushed his adversary into the water. The tide had turned some time, and the current ran with force enough to carry Vestick and several other warriors who were hurled into the stream at the same moment away from the land, and it was with some difficulty that they reached the farther shore. The fighting was still obstinate, but the party of Thorganger had for the moment the upper hand. Eric had time to think of his grandfather. He lifted him in his arms, and with some difficulty forced his way out of the fight, without its, happily, being discovered who it was that he was carrying. But he had not gone many yards upon the upland way when he heard the cry of 'Boats?' 'boats?' and looking round, he perceived that the foe had indeed been reinforced by a party bearing boats, which they were now launching on the stream; five minutes would bring them over. He looked despairingly at the steep ascent above them; could he possibly convey Thorganger to the castle, and yet be back in time to repulse this new attack? A voice sounded in his ear: 'Leave him to me; I will tend him.'

'This time, at least, thou shalt not escape me,' said

Eric, laying a rough hand upon Varenga, who was standing beside him. But she, without moving a muscle, said, in as calm a tone as if she were requesting the most trifling favour :

'Touch me not ! If thou provokest me beyond all endurance, then, indeed, all is over with thee and thine, but take my offer, and return to thy men ere all is lost for want of a leader.'

'And leave Thorganger to thy care ?' said Eric ; 'never !'

'I can do him no harm. See, he is dead already !' replied Varenga, stooping over the prostrate form. 'Thou canst not save him ; thou canst only avenge him.'

Eric, following her example, saw that she had, indeed, spoken the truth, that the great leader was dead. In all probability it had been on a senseless corpse that Vestick had wreaked his vengeance. He still, however, hesitated.

'Go !' said Varenga. 'I promise thee I will take care of the body ; it shall not be left a prey to the fowls of the air, nor an object of sport to thy foes.'

Loud, and more loud, grew the cries of distress from the ford. Eric dashed his hand across his eyes, and returned to the ford. Varenga looked after him :

'He must not perish,' she muttered ; 'for *his* sake I must save *them*.'

She turned towards the body, and, for the moment, there was a gleam of fierce exultation in her face. 'There thou liest, proud man !' she said ; 'but I promised *him* I would have care of thee.'

She lifted it, and with seemingly gigantic strength carried it, not up the cliff, but along the bank of the

river, until she came to a spot where thick wood covered the slope on either side. There she deposited it in a dark dell, carefully concealing it with brushwood.

'There thou shalt lie safely,' she said, 'until I return to seek thee. And now I must to it, and hurry that slothful Sigismund, or he may chance to arrive too late.'

When Eric returned to the fight, he found that his party still held their momentary advantage, for, as fast as the boats reached the narrow landing-place they were beaten back with considerable loss, and Vestick saw that some other way must be found. It was true that, by mere force of numbers, he could at length have wearied out his enemies, but this would have entailed too great a loss upon himself, as well as being too long and tedious a plan to suit the impatient spirit of his followers. He, therefore, gave orders that they should desist from the attack, and should endeavour to form a bridge of boats, by which they could cross in greater numbers, and be less at the mercy of their foes. When the defenders saw what was intended, they some of them threw themselves into the water, and cut the thongs that bound the boats. But, in addition to the stream running fast, a boat was pushed close on to the shore on which stood three giants, who guarded the passage, cutting down with unerring strength and skill all who attempted to oppose the making of the bridge. At this conjuncture there was an inquiry made after Thorganger; but somebody took on himself to reply that the chief was wounded, and had withdrawn from the battle to rest a bit. Eric was much relieved to have the difficulty thus solved for the moment. Seizing his grandfather's axe, he flung himself against one of the

three giants, and with such success that the man staggered and fell, desperately, though not, perhaps, mortally wounded. His comrades, with a howl of rage, raised their weapons against Eric, but Vestick called from the opposite bank :

‘ Beat him back, and kill him not ; it is the slayer of Horslonger ; he must fall by my hand !’

The giants contented themselves with pushing their boat off the shore, thus putting a band of water between them and their attacker.

But now appeared a man running along the top of the cliff; then another, and yet another. Could it be the expected aid arriving from Sigismund ? But their steps were too uncertain for that ; they seemed rather like men flying from their foes than those who brought news of approaching succour. And too soon the fatal truth was known, that Harold had been totally defeated, and that the victors were approaching rapidly to join their friends. At the same time, however, there arose a rumour, nobody knew how, that Sigismund would be there in little less than three hours, could they hold out for that time. This seemed impossible; but at least they had the certainty of being avenged. Each Northman set his teeth firmly, prepared to do his utmost and then to die.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'Ask me not what the maiden feels,
Left in that dreadful hour alone ;
Perhaps her reason stoops, or reels ;
Perchance a courage, not her own,
Braces her mind to desperate tone.'

SIR WALTER SCOTT—*Marmion*.

ALTHOUGH Rhunelda had made the fearful sacrifice to her followers' wishes which we have described in a former chapter, she found it had, in a great extent, been in vain. She was no longer what she had been ; they were suspicious of her ; the tardy accession to their desire had robbed it of half its grace, and the imputation of being a favourer of the Christians still clung to her, in spite of the terribly emphatic method in which she had endeavoured to prove the contrary. She was finding the truth of Eric's warning. A woman's hand was no longer capable of curbing the turbulent Northmen. Even her wonted luck seemed to desert her ; for, in a descent that she made on their own Scandinavian coast on their way back, to divert her people from the discontented reflections which had taken possession of them, she was repulsed with disgrace, and some loss, by, it so happened, that very ally of Thorganger to whom Sigismund had gone to seek aid in his leader's dire necessity. This, of course, made matters worse for Rhunelda, and she was daily fearing a revolt, when a storm coming on compelled them to seek shelter in a kind of harbour formed by a long, deep creek, on the shores of which dwelt no less a person than Vestick. He

received the storm-tossed warriors kindly, his object being to gain as many allies as he could for his intended expedition against Thorganger. Learning who his visitors were, he was the more anxious to secure their assistance, and after a little he proposed to them that instead of returning home, they should join their forces with his, and march against Thorganger and Eric, whom the wily Vestick described as ambitious tyrants, desirous to bring their neighbours into subjection.

'Eric!' repeated Rhunelda, thoughtfully; 'I once knew one of that name; surely it cannot be the same; he was under my father's care for awhile when he was quite a boy?'

'What was he like?' asked Vestick, eagerly; 'it may be the same, for this is but a youth, and it is only lately that he has come to live with Thorganger.'

'He was tall, with dark hair, and eyes that flamed like burning wood; and his speed was so great that none could catch him,' said Rhunelda, describing rather the Eric she had seen at her father's funeral than her playfellow of ancient days. Vestick summoned one of those who had escaped from the sack of Horslonger's castle:

'Tell us,' he said, 'the likeness of him who slew my kinsman.'

'He was tall,' replied the man, 'and, unlike the sons of the north, his eyes and hair were dark, and his voice clear as a harp; surely there was something about him that was not of this earth. He came to Thorganger from the far north, and wherever he goes he brings victory with him.'

'It must be the same,' said Rhunelda.

'Was he friend or foe of thine?' asked Vestick.

'A foe! a foe!' she answered hastily; 'he was concerned in the slaying of my father.'

'Then, daughter of Oscar, an opportunity is offered thee!' cried Vestick, joyfully; 'join thy forces with mine, and together we will fight these tyrants; thou to avenge thy father! I my kinsman!'

This proposal met with unusual acceptance among the Northmen, to whom the name of Oscar was still dear. They heartily undertook the service. Rhunelda was once again absolute, and her suggestion that they should return home to deposit their booty and refit their ships meeting with universal satisfaction, and Vestick making no objection, they started at once.

The expedition was most popular at home, and the places of those who had fallen were filled up without the smallest delay, although when she had set out in the early summer, Rhunelda had with difficulty found enough men for her two ships. All set forth in the highest spirits, certain of obtaining both revenge and booty. Rhunelda alone did not share this enthusiasm; she was haunted by visions of the bishop; in every moment of silence she heard his sweet, mild voice ringing in her ears; and, in addition, her sleep was troubled by what she could not but regard as prophecies. One night she was lying, as she fancied, wide awake when a voice sounded, clear and distinct, beside her:

'Beware! the day that thou encounterest Eric, thou art doomed!'

She started up, but could see, could hear nothing. All was calm and still around her ; the Northmen were asleep, or were engaged in navigating their vessel. She lay down again, and this time there could be no doubt that she fell asleep ; but she had terrible dreams. She thought her father stood beside her, wrapt in his bear-skin as of yore, and wearing on his head the wonted cap with the eagle's plume.

' Daughter ! ' he said, and as he spoke he laid an icy-cold hand upon hers, ' thou art doomed ! Our name must perish ! Another sun is rising—is already above the horizon—before which ours must pale like the morning star when the dawn purples in the east ! '

It seemed to Rhunelda that she tried to speak, but that some powerful force restrained her; but the spectre, as though it had read her thoughts and was answering them, continued :

' Thou must go forward ; turning back will not save thee.

' "For the raven crowned must fail
Before the raven on the oak."'

Rhunelda seemed to make a desperate effort to speak ; that effort broke the spell, and she started up, trembling in every limb, to find herself in darkness and alone. This dream made a great impression upon her ; and though she prudently kept it to herself, fearful of its effect upon the spirits of her followers, she none the less brooded over it in secret. However, for the present, at all events, everything seemed to be going on well.

On reaching Vestick's creek, they were met by a

messenger from that leader, who had already started, requesting them to continue their course along the coast until they should come to the mouth of the river upon which Thorganger's domains were situated, and up which they were to sail as long as it was navigable, and then, abandoning their ships, they were to march by the upper cliff until they should arrive opposite to where Vestick was encamped, when they were to attack the foes in the rear. The plan seemed simple enough, and there was no difficulty in carrying it out. They found the mouth of the river, entered it, and when they came to a convenient spot, left their vessels and pursued their march on dry ground. They moved very slowly, according to the directions they had received, so as to allow Vestick time to reach the rendezvous first, for the success of their enterprise depended upon the attention of Thorganger's force being so taken up in the front that they might be able to steal up unperceived behind.

Very soon after quitting their ships, they entered a dense forest, where they were scarce able to perceive whether they were going up or down. The gloom around added to the weight upon Rhunelda's spirits. Her depression was generally noticed, and there were anxious inquiries as to what it could mean. An uneasy feeling pervaded every one; and when, at the end of the second day, they found themselves on the banks of the river which they ought by this time to have left far below them, a blank sense of dismay settled down on them all.

Rhunelda was seized with despair, and seemed as if she could neither think nor act. The old warrior who had formerly so much thwarted her came to her aid,

proposing that they should remain where they were for the present, and that with dawn they should follow the course of the river, which would probably lead them the shortest way out of the forest, and that when once clear of the trees they would be able to find some means of ascending the cliffs, to follow out their instructions to the letter. This was accordingly done, and with earliest gleam of light they were on the march, until, on issuing from the wood, they found themselves unexpectedly in the presence of an enemy ; Harold's forces, as we narrated in a former chapter, being as much surprised to see them in the valley beneath, as they were to perceive their foes waiting for them on the cliff above.

However, as these foes began to descend the hill, it was evident they meant to oppose their further progress, and as some scouts sent on by Rhunelda returned to say there could be no doubt that these were their enemies, as they had seen young Eric among them, they prepared for instant fight. Rhunelda had a strange feeling—more like fear than anything she had ever before experienced—her limbs shook, and her eyes grew misty. Retreat was an impossibility. She ordered forward the standard, herself, according to custom, accompanying it. She eagerly scanned the enemy's lines as soon as she was near enough to do so, and could perceive no traces of that light, active figure she so much dreaded, nor was the banner a raven on the oak. For this time, at least, they were safe. She waited for the answer of the herald she had sent to demand of their opponents if they came as friend or foe—were they the followers of Vestick or of Thorganger ?

The reply was brief. They were followers of Thorganger, led by Harold ; they would oppose to the death the passage. But as the daughter of Oscar examined their ranks, she saw nothing which led her to despair of victory. She perceived, it is true, many veteran faces ; but she also noted that the spirit that animated them was vacillating and uncertain. Her own men, on the contrary, advanced firmly and unhesitatingly, confiding in the leader who had so often guided them to victory.

The issue of the combat might easily be predicted from this different spirit of the troops engaged. After a faint defence, the followers of Thorganger gave way, and Harold, to his burning shame, found himself once again obliged to fly. His first impulse was to throw himself over the cliff to meet the death that would not come to him in any more honourable shape ; but he was stopped in this mad project by the jarl we mentioned as being a warm partisan of his, and who, though now bitterly disappointed at his favourite's failure, did all in his power to help him. He proposed that, as the pursuit was by no means warm, they should collect and hurry forward as quickly as possible, to warn the fighters at the ford of their danger, and to prepare to defend the opening to the castle, towards which the foes must come ; and they could not either cross the river or make their way along the lower valley as they were at present doing. Harold thankfully accepted the expedient, and thus they arrived, broken and dispirited. What next immediately ensued, our readers will have learnt from the close of the previous chapter.

Rhunelda checked the pursuit of the flying foes, fearful of arriving too soon ; with her little force, it was

utterly impossible that she could withstand the shock of a power like that of Thorganger, proved as he now was to be thoroughly on the alert. They had not gone very far, however, when they heard the confused sound of fighting, and the quickest-eared among them declared that they could distinguish the war-cry of Vestick. They now pressed forward with all the eagerness of men longing to be in action. They had had none killed in the last action, only a few wounded; so they had nothing to damp their joy.

Suddenly the valley contracted, and they found themselves in a narrow gorge, where there was no pass between the cliff and the river on either hand, and the sounds of fighting grew nearer; and it was tantalising to be so near, and yet unable to join in it. Rhunelda espied a slight cleft in the rock; by this they might manage to reach the top. One by one they swung themselves up, with the agility of cats, Rhunelda, leading the way, and bearing the standard. A short distance up they gained a ledge, along which they were able to walk, or rather scramble, which saved them from the necessity of getting quite to the top. They ran the risk of meeting with their foes waiting to oppose them. Their position was one of great danger; a false step, and they would be plunged into the river; if the enemy saw them from above, nothing would be easier than to destroy them by hurling stones upon them. They moved with the greatest precaution, keeping as close to the rock as possible, and avoiding the least sound. They got round the first projection; another still thrust itself between them and the fight; but they had indubitable proofs they were drawing near to it. Not only did the

noise of battle-axes and the shouts of the combatants grow loud, but from time to time a dead body was floated down on the stream, whose waters were dyed with the blood from the gaping wounds.

All at once the sound grew more confused; there was a noise as of the rushing of many feet. Was it Vestick's men, who, having made their way over the river, were now climbing the heights? Several wounded were swept down by the tide, and as they passed they stretched out imploring hands, with cries for help, or deep-muttered words of hate, according as they recognised friend or foe. Every heart beat high, every warrior strained his muscle. A few moments now would decide everything; but those few moments were intensely anxious, for the footing on the cliff was such as could only be used by men accustomed to mountains.

On the other side of the projection the platform grew wider, being, in fact, that terrace upon which the castle stood. But as they passed round the boulder, the fatal truth was revealed to them. Vestick was in full flight! The sound of feet that they had heard had been those of the succourers of Thorganger.

It was Sigismund, who, arriving just at the moment when Eric felt that he could not maintain the ford for another ten minutes, had joined his ample aid to the discouraged and dispirited, but now thoroughly rested, troop of Harold, borne down with an irresistible force upon Vestick, who had found himself obliged to fly when victory seemed most certain.

Rhunelda and her followers pressed forward with the hope of being able to make a diversion by attacking their victorious foes in the rear; but in vain. They

had already been discovered by Sigismund, and a chosen band rushed along the platform to oppose them. There ensued a most terrible hand-to-hand fight. Rhunelda's followers were animated by the courage of despair; those of Sigismund with the hope of speedy victory. On neither side was there mercy given or expected. Those who were thrust over the narrow edge of the terrace, renewed their fight on the one below; or when thrown into the water, those who were not too sorely wounded to do so, struck another blow at their adversary, until the stream whirled them both away. It seemed like a fight that would only end with the death of all the combatants; there was scarcely a man on either side who was not wounded. Rhunelda still remained unhurt, and sustained the spirits of her fainting followers. Everywhere that bright axe carried death; stalwart warriors collapsed before it, and seemed to have but the strength of children. Sigismund, seeing how much depended upon her, pressed upon her to cut her down; but lightly she escaped his blows, and the good old man was himself wounded and bleeding.

Neither party gained or lost, when help arrived to the defenders, in the person of Eric, who, learning from a messenger how closely pressed was Sigismund, hastened with a band to his faithful friend's assistance, leaving the care of the pursuit to Harold and their ally. This arrival discouraged the followers of Rhunelda, as much as it inspirited those of Thorganger. Eric had given orders that the standard should remain with Harold, but the standard-bearer had fallen desperately wounded, and as he fell had thrust the pole into the hands of Gobby, whose only idea of obedience was to

follow Eric as closely as possible ; and thus while the warriors perceived that they had before them the leader of the opposite party, Rhunelda felt a chill like that of death when she saw the fatal symbol of the ‘Raven on the Oak.’

She stood for a moment as if in a trance. Sigismund rushed at her with the intention of ending the fight by her death ; she avoided the full force of his blow, but she had been wounded, for the blood gushed over her white fur garment. She returned Sigismund’s blow, and the old man, already exhausted by long marching, hard fighting, and loss of blood, fell to the ground. For a few moments she fought blindly against those who would revenge him ; then looked around. She was almost alone ; the newly-arrived found no difficulty in bearing down her sorely-wounded followers ; only her standard-bearer was beside her, and he, covered with blood, looked more dead than alive. He made one last effort, by throwing himself upon Gobby, to capture the enemy’s standard ; but expiring nature refused to aid him, and almost before he received the blow with the standard-pole (Gobby’s only weapon) which was aimed at him, he fell a corpse. At that moment Rhunelda perceived before her the tall warlike figure she so much dreaded, and the well-known voice exclaimed :

‘Yield, Rhunelda, that I may save thy life.’

‘Not to my father’s murderer,’ she answered, and raising her axe rushed upon him.

He received her, not with uplifted weapon, but with open arms ; and, wrenching her battle-axe from her hand, he bore her to the ground by main force, on the top of her own fallen standard.

Like a wild-cat caught in a trap, Rhunelda used the only weapons left to her, her teeth ! In vain ! she was only held down the firmer ; she felt that she was conquered, her head swam, and she became unconscious ! The band of Oscar had perished ; none survived but the daughter of the great Viking, and she lay like a corpse, and over her victor's head waved wildly—the Raven on the Oak !

CHAPTER XIX.

'Last, o'er the warrior's closing grave
Rang the full choir, in choral stave.'

SIR W. SCOTT.

IT was the noon of the day following the desperate fight recorded in our last chapter; Eric and Harold were walking along the terrace where the last act of that drama had been played, or rather fought, out.

The faces of both were thoughtful and sad ; the victory had been theirs, but they had bought it dearly. Scarcely one of the jarls was unhurt ; Sigismund lay, they knew not if alive or dead ; their very castle was garrisoned by their ally ; and though all through the night and early morning men had been pouring in from every side, they were the more remote dependents of Thorganger, and could not be to them like the friends who had fought by their side. Above all, they had lost Thorganger, the wise, the steady ; as soon as the press-

ing danger was over, they might expect all the wild rivalries to burst forth with renewed power, that had so long been held in check by his firm prudent hand; but the more immediate care of the two young men was to seek the wounded, and to arrange for the burial of the dead.

The river had acted the part of a great sexton, and many and many a warrior, dead or wounded, had it borne down into the sea. It had been the sight of these bleeding mutilated bodies that first gave the alarm to those of Rhunelda's followers who had been left to guard the ships; and as the hours passed, and the corpses grew more frequent, and they recognised amongst the dead several of their own warriors, they came to the conclusion that all was lost, and precipitately abandoning all the ships save one, they set sail to escape as quickly as possible from the confined river, so that the band sent out by Eric to scour the country in every direction for a certain number of miles, found no foe to fight with.

The two young leaders had come to seek for the jarls who were missing, and more especially for the body of Thorganger. They went along the terrace as far as the fight extended in that direction, without discovering any one for whom they were seeking.

'There can be none of our people as far as this,' said Harold; 'see, there are nought but foes here.'

'It is true,' said Eric, with a sigh, as he glanced on many a face which he had known in boyhood.

'We will return and send men to bury them,' said Harold; and slowly they retraced their steps. But instead of going to the castle, Eric insisted on making

their way to the ford. Harold followed somewhat unwillingly.

‘What! thou art not surely afraid of the dead?’ said Eric.

Harold shuddered. Though nominally a *chieftain*, he was very far indeed from being above the superstitions of his age; he dreaded seeing something supernatural beside the dead warriors—some of those grisly hags who were supposed to feed only upon the bodies of the slain. Eric had no such fears. Had he not been a Christian he would never have been a firm believer in the religion of his country; his mind was too clear and active for that. But he wiped away a tear when they stood beside the landing, and he saw around him those in whose company he had fought the last desperate combat; there they lay, piled one upon another, just as they had fallen, and all dead, for while life lasted to a wounded man he had roused himself to give a last stroke at the advancing tide of their foes. The bodies, too, of Vestick’s followers, half in and half out of the water, showed only too plainly how dearly every inch of ground had been won. Among them was that giant whom Eric had wounded in the early part of the day, and who, after cutting down all who approached him, at last had fallen beneath the axe of the young leader.

All was still and gloomy here, for the autumn sun, which was illuminating the hills above, could not penetrate into this deep and sombre valley. As the friends moved along the bank of the river the number of the slain gradually grew less and less, and at last entirely ceased.

'It is useless, Eric,' said Harold, pausing; 'it must have been washed away by the stream.'

Eric, for answer, pointed to two ghastly objects, a raven perched upon a rock, and a wolf who, at the sound of their footsteps, slunk away into the forest. 'To think of my grandfather's corpse being exposed to such as those!' he said, and pressed forward. At the entrance of the wood, Harold again stopped him to say:

'Eric, it is impossible that we can find him so far as this direction. See, all signs of the fight have long ceased. It must be as I said.'

'And yet,' said Eric, 'she said she would guard him.'

'Who?' asked Harold.

'Varenga,' replied his friend.

'Why, Eric,' said Harold, somewhat impatiently, 'how canst thou be so wild? She guard it, indeed! She would be only too thankful to expose it on some rock to the carrion crow.'

'Slander not!' said a voice; and Varenga emerged from the bushes in front of them. 'Slander not! but follow me, and thou shalt see how Varenga keeps her word.'

She flitted away down one of the paths of the forest, and Eric followed without a moment's hesitation; but Harold could not move; he stood pale and trembling, and a cold sweat broke upon his brow. He despised himself for his inaction; every motive of honour and generosity called loudly upon him to follow, but he could not break the icy spell that seemed to bind him. Eric and Varenga had disappeared; he was alone. What if the false witch had prepared some trap for his friend, and he were to die for want of help? The

thought maddened him ; the blood rushed in burning tides through his veins ; he made a step or two forward, tottered, and leaned against the stem of a tree for support. How long he stood like that he knew not, but it seemed an age before he heard Eric's friendly voice beside him.

' Harold, she has guarded the body safely and honourably ; wilt thou not come and see ?'

' Yes,' cried Harold, with an effort shaking off his lethargy, and eagerly imitating his rapid step. They saw in the distance a light that looked like a twinkling star.

' It is the fire she hath lighted to keep off the wolves,' said Eric. The star grew larger. When they were quite close, he said in an undertone, ' We must be careful to do nothing to offend her ; she is in a strange, wild mood.'

He then pushed aside the bushes to make room for himself and Harold to enter. They found themselves in an open, turfed space, surrounded by trees and bushes. In the centre lay Thorganger, his head resting upon a mossy mound. He was wrapt in his bearskin, and his broken helm and sword were beside him ; his hands were crossed upon his breast, and his face was full of that calm dignity and repose that had been so striking a part of his character ere age, by relaxing the control over his temper, had led him to give way to that irritability which had been so painfully apparent in the last few months. But now all was forgotten, and he lay like a Christian warrior taking his rest. As he gazed, Harold's fear fled away ; but when he looked round he shuddered again. At the feet of the corpse, like an embodiment of the heathendom he

had renounced, sat, or rather crouched, Varenga, her hair falling in disorderly masses over her shoulders ; and when she raised her head from time to time, her face was pale and streaked with blood, and there was a wild light in her eyes.

‘One of us must return to the castle,’ said Eric, ‘to send men to carry him home, and the other must stay here to guard, for she’—he glanced at Varenga—‘cannot be trusted. Wilt thou remain, or shall I?’

‘Thou, thou !’ replied Harold, hastily. ‘That is,’ he added, somewhat ashamed, ‘if thou dost not mind ?’

‘Not at all,’ answered Eric.

‘Keep well upon thy guard,’ implored Harold.

‘Never fear,’ said Eric, smiling ; ‘but haste, or it will be night before we get him home.’

Harold started, and the boughs rustled as he passed ; the sound of his footsteps grew fainter in the distance, then ceased, and Eric was alone in the forest with a corpse and a witch. The fire burnt red and sullen, casting a lurid, unnatural light upon the trees around, while the more remote alleys looked black and dim upon the dead warrior, and the young man with his earnest face leaning upon his battle-axe, and regarding his grandfather with a sad, but not hopeless expression. To complete the group, there was Varenga with her weird look and frenzied eye. For a while after Harold had gone she remained motionless and silent ; then, when there was no sound but the crackling of the fire and the distant call of some bird going to roost, she raised her head, saying wildly : ‘It is coming ! it is coming !’

‘What is coming ?’ asked Eric, starting a little.

‘*It* !’ replied the witch. ‘Dost thou not see it—

black, yonder ?' She pointed down a glade of the forest.

'I see nought,' answered Eric, soothingly. 'Fear not, I will protect thee.'

'Fear ? I fear nothing !' she answered, with a shrill ringing laugh ; continuing, however, after a moment, in a tone of alarm, as before : 'Couldest thou not have waited one hour ? one hour is all I ask, and then I yield. Thou wilt not ? I will, I say !' She screamed aloud.

'Dear Varenga,' said Eric, 'what is it that troubles thee ? Can I not do something for thee ? thou hast been so very kind to me.'

She paid him no attention, but sank back into her crouching attitude, and Eric could hear that she was muttering to herself. After a few moments she raised her head again, saying more calmly : 'It is over now for the present ; it will wait until I have finished what I have to do.'

Eric asked her if she would not like to leave him to watch, and go back to the castle ?

'No, no !' she answered ; 'here must it be finished.'

She seated herself upright, and her manner had recovered its wonted firmness as she suddenly said :

'Eric, thou art a Christian ?'

'Yes,' he replied, surprised at such a question from such a person.

'Keep so, then !' continued Varenga. 'I was one once.'

'Then,' began Eric, eagerly, 'there is hope——'

'Hush !' she said, with a return of her wildness, 'there is no hope for *me*. I betrayed religion, parents, everything, for the sake of *revenge*.' She paused ; then,

before Eric could speak, continued rapidly and sternly : ' But why tell I thee this ? I know not. That thou mayest despise me ? But, Eric, promise me one thing, that thou wilt never reveal to any one the place of my burial. I will have no priests coming to point out my grave with pious horror as that of an apostate. They may curse me if they will, that cannot hurt me ; but I will not have it known that I could have been better had I chosen. Promise me, Eric ? '

' I promise ! ' said Eric, startled by the revelation he had just heard, and not certain if he were awake or dreaming.

She was silent, and nothing broke the stillness until the welcome sound of voices and footsteps told Eric that help was nigh at hand. Let it not be considered as an imputation on his courage if he uttered a sigh of relief as he moved aside the bushes, waved his arm, and called to direct his friends aright.

They came ; their ally himself with five or six warriors. Harold's countenance brightened when he saw Eric before him, safe—not wounded or turned into any unnatural shape. His conscience had been accusing him all the way home for having left his friend in the post of danger, and had anything happened to Eric he would never have forgiven himself. Thus it would probably be with him all his life : too weak and cowardly to accept the danger, and yet with a keen enough sense of honour to make him ashamed when he had withdrawn to a place of safety.

They were hard, weather-beaten warriors who had come to fetch home the dead body of their chief, and yet their eyes grew dim as they looked upon him who

had led them so bravely and governed them so wisely, but whom they would never hear speak again. They glanced, too, with some anxiety at the young men, one of whom must be his successor. In point of comeliness there was not, perhaps, much to choose between them; but how different was the grave, resolute glance of the one, to the uncertain gait and hesitating manner of the other!

They turned them to their task, when Varenga, rising, pronounced, sternly and commandingly, the words, 'Stand back!'

Instinctively they obeyed. Though they had sworn to slay the witch, to whom they attributed all the misfortunes that had befallen them during yesterday's fight, now that they found themselves face to face with her, none cared to be the first to attack her, as she stood, with her head erect, and her haughty, undaunted bearing.

'I have somewhat to say to ye,' she began, 'and here must I say it, and briefly too. I have fulfilled my revenge—I have seen both my worst foes lie dead before me—but listen, and ye shall hear my tale. Years ago—thou mayest remember it, perchance' (looking towards the ally), 'Thorganger and Horslonger joined their bands to make a distant expedition. They were successful, as ye reckon success—they carried desolation and ruin over a long line of coast, until at last they reached the far-off shores of Italy. They landed beside a lovely village. Before they came, it glowed with all the rich beauty of the south, never seen in these hard northern climes; they left it a smoking heap of ruins. I saw them slay before my eyes my father, my mother, my

brethren, and my sister ; but because I had what men call beauty, they saved me alive, and carried me away with them—their slave. When we reached their country, Horslonger made me his wife; but justly did I pay him for it. Any one who knew him can tell how I served him. He would gladly have got rid of me, but he could not ; I clung to him like a burr. Little cared I for the reputation of a witch, or for the curses that were heaped upon me ; and at last he was hunted and slain like the wolf in its lair. I saw it ! Yes, and all the world may know what he suffered for having dishonoured a free-born Roman !' Her eye glittered with fierce indignation, and she paused a moment, as if to give full weight to her words, before continuing : ' Ye have heard how I can revenge injuries ; learn now how that I never forget a kindness. Before I became the wife of Horslonger, I was for a while under the roof and the care of Thorganger. One person only showed me kindness or thought, and that was Thorganger's daughter ; in her veins, too, flowed the blood of the stranger, and for her mother's sake she was kind to me, and I never forgot it. When first I saw that youth raise his axe against Horslonger, I knew her hair, her eyes, her form, and a few words from some of the warriors told me that I was right. For her sake I nursed him, when, if left to you, he would soon have been dead. But my debt was not yet paid. I could not yet prosecute my revenge against Thorganger, and therefore I grieve that he fell by the hand of Vestick. Think not, however, that I had aught to do with your misfortune ; ye have to thank your own imprudence for that. Ye would not listen to warning, and ye have reaped the consequences ; and had it not

been for my first summoning Eric, and then hurrying Sigismund, ye would have been swept away. I am for no party ; I only rejoice to see you, like wolves, fly at each other's throats ; but I owed it to *her* to save her son ; that done, I am free to exult over the fall of my enemy—and I *do* exult !'

'Wretched woman !' cried Eric, springing forward to grasp her.

Once again she eluded him, saying, in a low voice, so as to be heard by him alone :

'Brawl not ; respect the memory of the dead !'

Thus showing that, though she had so long indulged the truly heathen passion of revenge, there still remained in her breast some slight remnants of her early Christian training. Rapidly as this thought passed through Eric's mind, that moment was sufficient for Varenga to make her escape. Brushing by the warriors, not one of whom dared to oppose her, she was gone in an instant, and had disappeared from view. Nor was it ever known what became of her. Some stories affirm that she was devoured by wolves ; others, that she returned to the faith she had betrayed, and that a hermitess of great sanctity, who, many years later, when Christianity had generally spread throughout Norway, had her abode in the same district, but many miles to the south from Thorganger's residence, and whose tomb had afterwards a great reputation for the miracles that were performed at it, was none other than the once vindictive Varenga. Others, again, declared that she never died at all, and that her figure might be seen wandering in the forest, carrying a lighted torch, and that the spectre always appeared before some great event in the Thorganger

family; if it were for weal, she moved sorrowfully, with head cast down; but if for woe, her form was erect and her bearing proud. The last time that there is an authentic record of her having appeared, is sometime in the middle ages, the night before the last descendant of the house of Thorganger fell in a battle with the infidels, he having joined one of the crusading armies, and when, the last of her foes being dead, it may be supposed the unquiet spirit was able to rest.

Thorganger's body was carried to the castle, and the following day was buried quietly and reverently beneath one of his own well-beloved rocks. There was no priest to be had, but it was none the less a Christian ceremony; for there was no wild feasting and mad drunkenness, and tears were dropped on the grave of the old warrior-chief.

Then rose the question, Who should be his successor? The ally and all the outlying vassals considered Eric as such, not having heard of the sudden change, and even Harold's own partisans were reluctant to take a very active part in his favour, after the specimen they had had of his incapacity, to call it by no worse name. Therefore, had he chosen, Eric might have been leader of the Northmen. But Eric did not choose. He reminded his friends that his grandfather had distinctly and unequivocally named Harold as his heir; and though Thorganger's last audible words had been those of blessing to himself, he could not regard this as an undoing of his former deliberate resolution; he therefore, once for all, declined the proffered honour.

Harold, startled and alarmed, and humbled by the sense of his own failure, would have drawn back, but

there was no choice left him, and Eric reminded him that this charge had been added to the gift of Elfleda's hand, and that if he refused the one he was not worthy of the other. He took it, but entreated Eric to remain with him as his counsellor, as if on this depended all the fortune of his life. This Eric for the present consented to do, though he had visions of travelling far to the south, and taking arms under one of the Christian chiefs there resident.

An expedition was now organised to take revenge upon Vestick, and, if possible, destroy his power; for they all felt that there would be no security or quiet for them while that powerful and vindictive leader remained in their neighbourhood. As soon as they returned, Harold's marriage with Elfleda was to take place. Thus the castle was once more left to comparative solitude, but this time with a sufficient force to defend it in all emergencies; and Elfleda, though she might weep a little at parting with her lover, would have enough to do in tending the wounded to pass away the time of his absence.

CHAPTER XX.

'The captive thrush may brook the cage,
The prison'd eagle dies for rage.'

SIR W. SCOTT.

WHEN Rhunelda awoke from the long, heavy swoon into which she had fallen at the close of the fight, she found herself in a room, totally unknown to her. It was

small, and had but one window, deeply set in the rough stone walls, and through this the morning sun was streaming. She raised herself on her elbow, and tried to recollect where she was. She called ‘Waltham! Runder!—the names of the warriors who usually slept within reach of her voice. She passed her hand over her brow, and as she did so the pain caused by moving her arm reminded her of her wound. Was she, then, a prisoner? Her eye wandered round the apartment; it fell upon an object in one corner—her father’s blood-stained standard! And she now recollectcd having seen it dragged in the dust. Her brain seemed to whirl; with one shriek she fell back unconscious, just as the woman who had been left in charge of her, and who, worn by long watching, had gone into the next room to rest, entered the chamber.

For many hours out of the twenty-four during the next few days was Rhunelda delirious. It was as if the weakness of her woman’s nature, that she had so long held at nought, were now taking double revenge. Often it seemed to her that she was on a battle-field, and heard the confused sounds of the fighting, and the warriors that she had slain rose grim and spectral around her, as if reproaching her with having caused their death. Then she saw her father, no longer smiling encouragingly upon her, but gloomy and stern, and ever repeating the fatal words, ‘Thou hast ruined us!’ Next, beside him, stood the warrior-god, her patron; but when she would have joined them, she was waved back with the words, ‘Thou hast forfeited all right to a seat in Odin’s hall; thou wast defeated, yet thou didst not die!’ And mingled with these were visions of the burning bishop, ever ready, as

it seemed, to curse her. Was it wonderful that, such being the spectres that haunted Rhunelda's pillow, the good old woman who attended her should think she was possessed, and that it was only the decided orders left by Eric which saved her from being doomed as a witch. To these wild nights succeeded days of despair, when she lay in sullen silence, not asking for anything, and perfectly passive in the hands of her attendant. At last she grew a little better, and the fits of madness were less frequent.

One day she was lying half asleep, when the door was pushed open, and Elfleda entered. Poor Elfleda! she had shrank, in what she herself felt to be a very cowardly way, from seeing the wounded captive. She had promised both Harold and Eric on their departure that she would visit her; but the accounts of her ravings had rendered Elfleda more than ever unwilling to venture near her. Now, however, there was no longer this excuse; the prisoner was quiet, and Elfleda felt that she must go. She moved as quietly as possible, so as not to disturb the invalid; but Rhunelda's ear, from long training, was always on the alert, and she started up, demanding:

‘Who art thou?’

‘I am Elfleda, and I have come to see how thou farest,’ was the reply.

‘To triumph over me?’ said Rhunelda, impatiently.

‘No, indeed,’ answered Elfleda; ‘but to do for thee what I can. I promised Eric that I would visit thee.’

‘Eric!’ she repeated. ‘Then thou art his wife?’

‘No,’ said Elfleda, while a faint colour mantled in her cheek.

'But thou wilt be?' persisted Rhunelda, with a sort of angry defiance that her old playfellow should have ventured to love another.

'No,' again answered Elfleda, the blush deepening; 'I shall shortly wed another chief; but both he and I love Eric like a brother, and therefore I have come to see if I can help thee.'

'Art thou a Christian?' demanded Rhunelda.

'Yes.'

'Then thou wilt despise me, and mayest go,' said the captive.

'God forbid that I should despise any one!' said Elfleda earnestly, and drawing nearer to the window, against which Rhunelda leant—for she was now able to stand with a little support—and looking with curiosity and interest on the wild, graceful beauty, that sickness had not been able to dim, nor adversity to daunt.

On the other hand, there was a gentleness about Elfleda that instinctively attracted Rhunelda—something that reminded her of her early days and her lessons from John, and there was an unwonted softening of her manner, as she suddenly said:

'Can Christians be forgiven for whatever they do?'

'If they repent—yes,' said Elfleda, a little hesitatingly, for the unexpectedness of the question rather took her aback.

'For anything?' pursued Rhunelda. 'For having slain a man?'

'Yes,' said Elfleda, thoughtfully. 'But do you mean self-defence? For that is lawful.'

‘No,’ answered Rhunelda; ‘but for being a Christian —as I once burnt a bishop!’

Elfleda involuntarily recoiled with horror.

‘I knew it,’ said Rhunelda, bitterly. ‘I knew that thou couldest not help me, and that I must bear the load all my life. Why did I tell thee, though,’ she continued vehemently, ‘that thou mightest scorn me?’

‘Indeed, dear Rhunelda,’ said Elfleda, with tears in her eyes, ‘I do not scorn thee; if I could only help thee.’

But all was to no purpose; Rhunelda had shut herself up in a veil of reserve, nor would she again be persuaded to confidence. It was in vain that Elfleda sat with her every day, endeavouring to instruct her in some of the simplest truths of Christianity in the rude and imperfect way in which she herself knew them; Rhunelda either maintained a sullen silence, or else spoke wildly of the heathen gods, of Odin and Thor, or the more ghastly visions that haunted her pillow, of fiends ever waiting to seize her, of bishops in the midst of flames showering curses upon her for having caused their suffering, till Elfleda, terrified, longed for the return of Eric to soothe and control her raging; but though she did not know it, the seed had taken root and was silently growing, and Rhunelda’s rapid recovery was in a large measure due to the greater peace of mind she was attaining.

And now the warriors were expected back; their victory had been complete, and with very little loss to themselves. They had broken Vestick’s power, and brought him to sue for peace; and this time the name of Harold was joined to that of Eric in deeds of re-

nown ; he was at last realising the hopes of his ardent partisans.

It was the evening before they would arrive home ; already a large number of their followers had returned, and only the two young heroes with a chosen band still lingered to put the finishing touch to their enterprise. Those jarls who had come back were sitting round the fire in the hall, for the weather was chilly, telling their friends of all they had seen and done. Suddenly the old jarl we have before mentioned as being a great favourer of Harold spoke :

‘ I have been thinking,’ he said, ‘ what we can do to give pleasure and honour to the youth Eric. It is owing to him that all things have been settled so quietly and comfortably. Had he acted otherwise, we might long have been divided ; there are those who might not have submitted to Thorganger’s determination ’—he glanced towards Sigismund, who, now nearly recovered, was sitting at a little distance from him—‘ and I think we ought to do something especial for him.’

‘ Right, friend, right !’ said Sigismund, eagerly.

‘ And as,’ continued the jarl, ‘ the beating back the men from the north was mostly his doing ; and but for him that wild-cat Rhunelda would never have been captured, for she fought like a very demon, as thou, friend Sigismund, canst tell——’

‘ Marry, I can !’ said Sigismund, laughing ; ‘ my bones ache from her blows still.’

‘ Since she is caught,’ said the other, ‘ it is but meet she receive him as her conqueror, and, according to old custom, kneel before him when he enters, and

present to him the wine-cup. What say ye, friends ?

If Elfleda, who was present, was rather doubtful whether this abasing of Rhunelda would give extreme pleasure to Eric, she did not say so, and all the jarls agreeing to the proposal the more heartily as none of them, especially Eric's friends, bore any goodwill to poor Rhunelda, the plan was soon arranged, and Elfleda, to her dismay, was deputed to inform the prisoner of her fate.

She endeavoured to make her announcement as gently as possible, but Rhunelda interrupted her, saying fiercely :

' Then I am to acknowledge that he has conquered me ?'

Elfleda replied in the affirmative, and would have added something soothing, but Rhunelda cut her short with :

' I have heard enough.'

Some of the jarls, learning that she had taken the news more patiently than might have been expected, went up to her to give her some instruction in the part she was to play ; but Rhunelda, with a tone more suitable to her ancient dignity than to her present condition, informed them :

' Though Eric is my conqueror, ye are not, and I will not listen to ye ;' and the flash of her eye warned them they had better depart without saying more.

The morrow rose clear and fine, and every one was in a state of joyful excitement at the prospect of welcoming home the victors. Elfleda was in the midst of her maidens, preparing for the occasion. As they

attired her, they talked with all the pleasure of girls who are let loose to the enjoyments of a fête, after being for some time surrounded by gloom and suspense. All at once the merriment ceased, and Elfleda, turning to see the cause, perceived Rhunelda, who, being left alone, had wandered in here. Elfleda felt the deepest sympathy for her ; she herself, with her shy, retiring temper, dreaded even the part she would have to perform in greeting her victorious lover ; how much worse was it not, then, for the captive !

‘Thou art tired,’ she said ; ‘come and rest.’

‘No,’ replied Rhunelda, ‘I only came to watch thee.’

Elfleda glanced at her dress, the bearskin in which she had been taken, with her long hair falling over her shoulders.

‘Wilt thou not let us array thee in a suitable robe ?’ she said.

‘No ! they can force me to give the cup, but they cannot force me to dress otherwise than I choose.’

‘That cannot be them returning ?’ exclaimed Elfleda, suddenly ; ‘some one go and see.’

All the maidens choosing to obey this order, she went up to Rhunelda, and laying her hand on the prisoner’s, said kindly :

‘Thou longest for peace, Rhunelda ; dost thou not think that one way to obtain it would be to subdue thy pride ?’

‘Hush !’ said Rhunelda, with an accent of pain. ‘I want thee to do me a favour,’ she added, drawing from beneath her robe a circlet of gold curiously wrought ; ‘it is the only thing they have left me ; my father brought

it from foreign lands, and I want thee to take it, and wear it.'

'I cannot,' said Elfleda, tears rushing to her eyes, 'I cannot take it from thee.'

'Wilt thou not do me this pleasure?' said Rhunelda; 'I am like to have little enough; and I should like thee to have it—thou hast been kind to me.'

'Thou wilt wear it thyself,' said Elfleda.

'Such things become not captives,' was the brief reply; and the maidens now running back to say that it was a false alarm, she hastily drew back a few paces, leaving the circlet in Elfleda's hand.

The damsels exclaimed with delight when they saw the ornament, and without asking where it came from, prepared to place it in their lady's hair; she would have resisted, but an imploring look from Rhunelda restrained her, and she submitted.

Everything was ready, and they stood in the hall awaiting the victors. They were very near now, for already they heard the shouts of those outside; the sounds grew louder; they had crossed the ford, and were climbing the hill. Two of the jarls handed the wine-cup to Rhunelda with such precaution, that she exclaimed scornfully:

'Ye need not fear, jarls; I will not poison him.'

Sigismund clasped his hands convulsively; it was a hard moment for him, seeing another where Eric ought to be. He looked at Elfleda as she stood, with her cheeks glowing with excitement and shyness, in her robe of crimson, with Rhunelda's circlet in her dark hair; and then back at the wild warrior-maiden, and muttered savagely between his teeth:

'But for thee, he might have had the whole!'

And now Harold entered, no longer shrinking and diffident, but fully armed, with his cap with its eagle's plume in his hand, his step bold and free, and his eye sparkling like that of a hero. One bound and he was by Elfleda's side, and as he clasped her to his breast, it was with the honest conviction that he deserved his prize, that he was able to protect her. She, even in that first moment of exceeding happiness, thought of poor Rhunelda; half releasing herself, she said :

'Where is Eric?'

'Here,' said Harold, turning; 'he was with me this moment.'

And at that instant, Eric himself entered the hall; he had held back to allow Harold the first greeting. His look was bright, and his tone had no sadness or envy in it, as he greeted Elfleda, saying :

'Thou seest we have brought him safe back to thee.' He then turned, saying : 'Where is Sigismund—my old friend? Has he quite recovered?'

Sigismund and another jarl were endeavouring to persuade Rhunelda to perform the part assigned to her, only receiving however a very defiant : 'I will do it when I like, and how I like.'

Elfleda caught the tone, though not the words; and, alarmed, she began hastily to explain to Harold what had been intended, when Rhunelda surprised them all by suddenly stepping forward, and kneeling on one knee, presented the goblet to the victor, saying in a clear voice :

'I serve thee this day, in token that thou hast conquered me;' while the deep flush that overspread face

and neck showed what an effort this submission was to the proud spirit.'

'Rhunelda! I did not see thee,' cried Eric, much distressed; 'rise, I pray thee.'

But she would not until he had partaken of the wine. He carried it to his lips to satisfy her, and she, rising, stood with folded arms and bent head as if awaiting his further orders. He looked round in amazement to ask the meaning of this, but as no one spoke, Rhunelda herself broke the silence, saying:

'I am thy prisoner, sir chief; thou canst dispose of me as thou wilt. I should have slain thee, if I had had thee in my power; now thou canst slay me.'

'That is not a Christian's way of taking vengeance, Rhunelda,' said Eric, warmly.

'Do what thou wilt,' she answered.

'I will set thee free!' he said.

'To go where I will?' she asked, while a sudden glow of hope lit up her face.

'Yes; where thou wilt. If thou wilt stay with us, we will be glad to have thee; if not——'

'I may return to my own people?' she said eagerly.

'Yes.'

'But what is the good?' she added mournfully; 'my band is broken up, my people scattered. They would not obey me, after this; the name of Oscar has perished!'

'Then, Rhunelda,' said Eric, 'as I told thee when we stood by thy father's grave, that if ever thou wast in need of a friend I would help thee, stay with us, and I will protect thee.'

'On one condition,' she said.

There was a murmur of indignation at this, and even Harold would have stepped forward to interfere, and prevent his friend's kindness from being abused ; but Elfleda, laying her hand on his arm, restrained him.

'What is thy condition ?' asked Eric.

'That thou wilt not make me become a Christian.'

'Not against thy will,' said Eric, but in a disappointed tone.

'And thou canst forgive me for having pursued thee that day ? I would have slain thee if I had been able.'

'Forgive thee ?' said Eric ; 'ay, yes ! long ago.'

'Then I will stay with thee,' she said : 'I will become a Christian, if thou wilt make me like thyself, and love me just a little, for oh, Eric ! I have been very lonely since my father left me !'

And the first tears she had shed since that night on the hill, by her father's grave, rolled slowly down her cheeks. Eric, who knew the influence exercised by the great sea-king over those to whom he opened his heart, put his arm round her, and drew her towards him. The kindness broke Rhunelda's self-control, and her sobs came thick and fast ; ashamed of what she had long been wont to regard as weakness, and still very wild and untamed, she stamped with the passionate endeavour to stop them, her face became scarlet, and breaking from him, she rushed out of the hall. Elfleda's eyes had filled with tears when she heard those mournful words : 'I have been so lonely ;' and she now hastily followed Rhunelda, to give her what comfort she could.

Harold went up to Eric, and drew him away, rather

to the disappointment of those warriors who had looked for some manifestation of pleasure from their young leaders ; however, the faces brightened when they saw the preparations for the feast, and heard that all would appear at the banquet.

Rhunelda's tears, though violent, did not last long, and she was soon again tolerably calm ; but as if her self-control had all evaporated in the effort to humiliate herself before Eric, she exclaimed rather petulantly to Elfleda, who was soothing her :

' Go down to the feast ; thou art wanted there !'

' And so art thou,' answered Elfleda.

' I am ready, then,' she said, tossing back her hair.

' But now thou art no longer a captive, wilt thou not let me make thy dress more fit for a festal board ? I am sure Eric would like to see it.'

' Dost think so ?' said Rhunelda ; ' then thou mayest do it. He has been most generous to me.'

' No wonder,' thought Elfleda, as she took advantage of this sudden yielding, ' that he is so fond of her, since to him she is so submissive, to others so wild.'

She had scarcely made the alteration necessary to change Rhunelda into something more like the ideas of civilised life, and less like a wild bear, when they were summoned to the feast. Harold and Eric were standing at the entrance of the hall. The former was so angry with Rhunelda for her ungraciousness, that he would much rather have shaken her than treated her as an honoured guest by placing her at his right hand. However, he yielded to circumstances, and in the course of the feast discovered that there was *some* beauty in those flashing blue eyes and thick masses of golden hair.

She was the object of general curiosity, for those who had not experienced the terrors of fighting with her had heard of her, and all watched her as if she had been a kind of monster kept chained for their especial amusement. When they were gathered round the fire, after supper, the conversation turned upon a wolf-hunt they would be obliged to undertake next day, wolves having appeared in great numbers near the castle.

'Oh, Eric ! do let me come with thee,' said Rhunelda, eagerly ; 'it is so long since I hunted a wolf, and it is so beautiful out in the free, wild forest !'

'Art thou not afraid to venture near those savage animals ?' asked Elfleda, shuddering.

'Afraid ? oh no !' she answered, opening her eyes wide in amazement.

'Ah, Rhunelda,' said Eric, laughing, 'Elfleda's notions of what a maiden ought to do are very different from thine.'

She coloured, feeling that she had betrayed herself ; but as one by one took up the tale, relating their experiences, her eyes sparkled with keen interest ; and as he watched her, even Sigismund was obliged to acknowledge that she was a fitter mate for a sea-king than the gentler Elfleda, whose cheek grew pale at these very stories which only lit up Rhunelda's with greater animation.

And now came the hour for parting for the night, Harold followed Elfleda up the steep stone stairs to take leave of her at the door of her room, his heart bounding with the happiness of the love there was no longer any necessity to conceal. He told her that in the course of their journey they had met Furchen, and that the mer-

chant had promised to make the best of his way to the dwelling of a holy priest some miles to the south, who might soon be expected at the castle to perform the marriage ceremony for Harold and Elfeda.

'And then he will be able to baptize Rhunelda,' said the latter joyfully.

'Perhaps even to do something more for her,' said Harold, smiling, and looking back to where Eric and Rhunelda were standing by one of the deep, narrow, slit-like windows on the stairs. They were talking very much in the same friendly way they used to do, years before. Suddenly Rhunelda, colouring deeply, said :

'Eric, dost thou remember once telling me that I could not rule the Northmen; that I was not strong enough to do so. I want to tell thee that thou wast right, and that I failed.'

'Dost thou remember something else that I told thee at that time?' said Eric. 'I told thee that I loved thee, and thou wouldest not listen to me. Wilt thou believe me now, Rhunelda, and say yes?'

'If thou wishest,' she answered. But, as he drew her towards him, and her head sunk upon his breast, she had a sense of being protected and loved that had not been hers for many a long day. Thus Eric won his bride, and the wild daughter of the ocean was conquered at last.

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